The Elder Sister

A Maithili novel exploring sisterhood, ageing, family responsibility, and the dignity of care.

Barki Bahin

Original Maithili novel authored by

Jagdish Prasad Mandal

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Translated into English by

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Pallavi Prakashan
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An English Translation of the Maithili novel Barki Bahin
Authored by Jagdish Prasad Mandal
Translated into English by Dr. Mukesh Mahato

The Elder Sister is a literary English translation of Shri Jagdish Prasad Mandal's Maithili novel Barki Bahin. Rooted in the rural world of Mithila, the novel centers on Sulochana, known throughout the village as Barki Bahin, the elder sister. Her life unfolds through abandonment, ageing, family division, social neglect, and the fragile hope of human care.

Mandal's narrative does not present Sulochana merely as an individual character. Through her, the novel explores the moral fabric of family, kinship, and village society, as well as widowhood, women's vulnerability, migration, education, property disputes, and the evolving meaning of responsibility. The story moves from ancestral courtyards and village fields to towns, hospitals, railway journeys, and distant working lives, revealing how modern mobility often weakens traditional bonds while also creating new forms of duty.

This translation seeks to preserve the emotional depth, reflective rhythm, and cultural texture of the original Maithili. The Elder Sister offers a profound meditation on sisterhood, ageing, social conscience, and the dignity of care.

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Dedication

To all elder sisters
whose silent endurance, affection, and moral strength
hold families and societies together.

- Dr. Mukesh Mahato

Preface

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The Elder Sister is the English translation of Shri Jagdish Prasad Mandal's Maithili novel Barki Bahin. Set in the rural landscape of Mithila, the novel tells the story of Sulochana, an elderly woman known throughout her village as Barki Bahin, the elder sister. The title itself carries the emotional weight of the narrative. Sulochana is remembered not merely as an individual but as a living relationship, an embodiment of affection, endurance, silent suffering, and moral presence within the collective memory of the village.

The novel opens with Sulochana's return to her native village at the age of eighty-six. She arrives from Bilaspur with her nephew, Raghunath, and her presence stirs the entire village. People call out that Barki Bahin has returned. This moment of return is not only the beginning of the narrative but also the reopening of a long human history. As Sulochana observes the changed village, the narrative gradually unfolds her past: her childhood in a modest farming family, her early marriage, her abandonment, her life in her parental home, her silent endurance, and her deep attachment

to the soil, courtyard, and people of Mithila.

Sulochana was married young into an ordinary farming family. After a few years, she was driven out of her husband's home because she was childless. No medical examination was conducted, and no effort was made to uncover the truth. The blame fell squarely on her, as it often does on women in a society where custom carries more authority than justice. Through this single incident, Mandal reveals one of the novel's central concerns: the vulnerability of women within the structures of family, marriage, lineage, social honour, and inherited prejudice.

Yet Sulochana is not portrayed as defeated. Her parental family accepts her, and she continues to wear her bangles. This act is quiet but powerful. She refuses erasure. Although she has no children of her own, she becomes the village's elder sister. She sings at rituals, assists in marriages, participates in domestic and social life, and becomes woven into the memories of others. The irony is striking: the same society that receives her affection, labour, songs, and cultural presence does not always ensure her dignity, sustenance, shelter, or care in old age.

The world around Sulochana is far from static. Mandal's narrative traces the shifting landscape of Mithila: small farming households, uncertain agriculture, floods, inadequate irrigation, poverty, caste divisions, education, migration, and the growing pull of urban employment. Through Sulochana's brothers, Jugesar and Munesar, the novel follows the journey from village life to distant places such as Ranchi, Palamu, and Bilaspur. Education provides livelihood, but it also

creates distance. Homes are built in towns, while ancestral courtyards are left empty. Families may prosper economically, but emotional bonds and responsibilities begin to erode.

The dispute over land between Jugesar and Munesar forms an important part of the novel. Land in this narrative is not merely property. It represents memory, livelihood, status, inheritance, and conflict. A small piece of land becomes significant enough to divide brothers, embitter wives, bring police and courts into family life, and weaken the natural bond between brother and sister. Mandal shows, with sharp social insight, how property, when separated from moral responsibility, can damage the very family it is meant to sustain.

At the centre of these conflicts stands Sulochana Bahin. She owns little and demands little, yet everyone’s truth is revealed through her. Jugesar’s bitterness, Sadhana’s anger, Munesar’s hesitation, Raghunath’s moral awakening, Sunita’s compassion, Radhacharan’s helpfulness, Doctor Shekhar’s concern, and Yamuna’s affectionate memory all become visible through Sulochana’s suffering. She remains the still centre of a restless family world. Her presence measures others. Whoever comes near her is tested by her helplessness, her affection, and her need for care.

One of the most moving moments in the novel occurs when Sulochana falls near the hand pump while fetching water. Her body is badly injured. The scene is simple, rural, and deeply tragic. A woman known throughout the village as the elder sister lies helpless, while family members hesitate, delay, withdraw, or

calculate. Munesar, though old and ill himself, travels from Ranchi to take responsibility for her treatment. His journey is not only physical but also moral. He confronts the failure of family, the absence of his wife's support, the burden of his own illness, and the urgent need to act.

Munesar's character provides one of the novel's strongest ethical dimensions. He is not heroic in an extraordinary sense. He is tired, aged, ill, and emotionally wounded. Yet he does what must be done. He understands that affection has no value if it does not translate into action. Through him, Mandal suggests that family is preserved not by blood alone but by service. Kinship becomes meaningful only when it turns into responsibility at the moment of suffering.

The younger generation introduces a note of hope. Raghunath, Munesar's son, and Sunita, his wife, grasp the seriousness of the crisis. Raghunath realises that a few kathas of land cannot justify the destruction of family dignity. Sunita recognises the practical necessity of care more clearly than others. When Sadhana does not step forward, Sunita decides to go to Ranchi herself. Her decision stands as one of the novel's finest moral moments. She sees Sulochana not as a burden but as a respected elder of the family. In Sunita, the novel finds the possibility of renewal: a modern woman who understands that care is not weakness but the highest form of human strength.

The final movement of the novel takes Sulochana from village neglect to medical care in Ranchi. Radhacharan assists Munesar in a moment of difficulty. Doctor Shekhar and Yamuna combine professional skill with human compassion. Sulochana's operation is

successfully performed in the presence of three doctors. This does not erase the pain of her life, but it restores dignity to her body and meaning to the idea of kinship. After treatment, she goes with Munesar, Raghunath, Sunita, and the child to Bilaspur, and later returns to the village. The novel comes full circle with this return, though it is now transformed by care.

Shri Jagdish Prasad Mandal’s purpose in this novel is neither sentimental nor merely reformist. He does not present Sulochana’s life to evoke pity alone. Instead, he uses her story to raise difficult questions. What is the meaning of family if an elder sister has no secure place in old age? What is the value of property if it destroys trust? What is the worth of education if it does not deepen responsibility? What is society if it remembers a woman in songs, rituals, and affection, yet neglects her hunger and illness?

Mandal’s strength lies in his rooted understanding of village life. He captures its speech, humour, bitterness, faith, hesitation, and moral contradictions. His narrative does not separate individual suffering from social structure. Sulochana’s pain is linked to child marriage, infertility, abandonment, living widowhood, inheritance, migration, medical insecurity, and changing family dynamics. For this reason, Barki Bahin is not merely the story of one woman. It is a serious reflection on Mithila’s social conscience.

Translating Barki Bahin into English has been both a literary responsibility and a personal learning experience for me. I belong to Vaishali district, and I did not inherit Maithili in the same natural and complete manner as someone who grows up fully within the

linguistic heartland of Mithila. Yet my attachment to the language, its literature, and its cultural world has grown steadily through study, listening, practice, and sincere effort. I have been trying to learn Maithili seriously, and much of its emotional force, social idiom, and cultural rhythm has gradually become familiar to me.

While preparing this English translation, I worked primarily with the original Maithili text of Shri Jagdish Prasad Mandal's Barki Bahin. At the same time, I also consulted the Hindi translation of the novel prepared by Shri Navratan Kumar Baingani. That Hindi rendering served as a helpful bridge in understanding certain dense expressions, rural idioms, kinship terms, and cultural nuances of the original Maithili. I gratefully acknowledge this assistance, as it helped me move closer to the spirit of the original text.

For me, translation has not meant a mere transfer of words from one language to another. The deeper challenge has been to preserve the emotional rhythm, cultural texture, rural memory, and moral force of Mandal's narrative. Maithili contains subtle shades of address, affection, irony, pain, and social relationship. Words such as Bahin, naihar, sasur, diyad, and many others carry a cultural warmth that cannot always be reproduced literally in English. My effort has therefore been to remain faithful not only to the meaning of the novel but also to its inner pulse.

This translation may be seen as a bridge between Mandal's Maithili world and English readers. On one side stand the courtyards, fields, floods, songs, kinship, hunger, illness, dignity, and moral struggle of rural Mithila. On the other side stand readers who may not

know this world directly but who can still respond to the human truth of Sulochana Bahin's life. I have tried, with humility and care, to bring these two worlds into conversation.

The Elder Sister is, at its core, a novel about care. It suggests that the dignity of a family is tested not in prosperity but in illness; not in inheritance but in service; and not in words of affection but in the willingness to stand beside the vulnerable. Sulochana Bahin's life reminds us that an elder sister is not only a familial relation. She is often the silent moral force that holds both family and society together.

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Among four brothers and sisters, Sulochana, the eldest, was known throughout the village as Barki Bahin, the elder sister. Hers was a family with barely two or two and a half bighas of land.

At the age of eighty-six, having reached the final step on life's downward slope, Sulochana returned to the village from Bilaspur in Madhya Pradesh with her nephew, in his car. The moment she arrived, the village stirred with excitement.

"Sulochana Bahin has come! Barki Bahin has come!"

In fact, following the older generation, even the younger generation addressed Sulochana simply as Bahin. Within moments, girls, boys, and women from one or two hamlets began to gather. Raghunath stopped the car at the threshold, got down, and helped everyone out one by one. Holding her two-year-old grandson in her lap, Sulochana stepped out of the car.

She had a sturdy, well-filled body, silver bangles on both wrists, and wore a fine, plain white sari. Her frame was heavy and rounded. As soon as she got down, she lifted her eyes and looked around. It seemed to her that

everything in the village had changed since she had left. Having given up all hope of life, she had touched the feet of her house, courtyard, and village, telling herself that she was going away after one last glimpse of them. She had never hoped she would see the village again.

Just then, her eyes fell on her elder brother's wife. The moment their eyes met, both were overcome. Words stopped on their lips. Meanwhile, Basmatia Didi also arrived, her face shrivelled, a stick in her hand. Just as Sulochana was a daughter of the village, so was Basmatia Didi. The two were of the same age, though Sulochana Bahin was three months older. Seeing Basmatia Didi, Sulochana asked, "Have you withered away so much in just a year?"

Since childhood, the two had spent their lives together, and there had never been any restraint in the way they spoke to each other. Without hesitation, Basmatia Didi replied, "You are the one who has eaten from the earnings of brothers and nephews and turned into a round lump. Who is there to give anything to me?"

As if teasing her, Sulochana said, "Why, has God turned His face away from you, that there is no one to provide?"

Basmatia said, "Yes, that is true enough. But one gives only out of what one earns. Well, tell me, there was no trouble near the broken bone, was there? Did it set properly?"

"Yes. Now I can even lift a bucket, and I carry my grandson in my lap and arms and play with him. I have my own car too. Now I shall live in the village."

"Will you be able to live alone at this age?"

"Munesar will live here now too, will he not? He will

also come tomorrow. Until then, somehow, in this broken-down house, he will make a proper place to live. How long are we going to live anyway? But as long as the eyes can still see, arrangements must be made for that much time."

Sulochana had been married at the age of fourteen. Just as her father's family was an ordinary farming family, so was the family into which she was married. In society then, wealth did not matter as much as lineage and family standing, though the custom of giving and taking in marriage was certainly present. A girl from a good lineage was in greater demand. Her marriage had taken place in a family somewhat below her father's lineage and standing, yet this had not happened only to her. It had happened to many in society, and still does. So no question was raised.

Sulochana had been born in a village of Mithilanchal through which a stream flowed. From the east, the waters of the Kosi, and from the west, the waters of the Kamala, came as floods during the rainy season. Since there were no embankments on the Kosi or the Kamala, by the time the floodwaters reached the village, they became thinner and weaker. Yet there was no certainty at all about rain and showers. In years of heavy rain, the floods too were large and prolonged; in years of little rain, the floods were smaller.

For farming in the village, there was no means other than rain. A little farming was done with wooden water-lifts, but that water came from ponds, which dried up on their own in Baisakh and Jeth. If a pond was deep, three or four wooden lifts had to be fixed one above another to raise its water. Wheat cultivation, therefore, was almost negligible. A few people grew it on two or

four kathas of land, and that too without proper irrigation.

It was certainly difficult for Sulochana's father, Harihar, to run a family of six, but Harihar was not the only one in the village in such a condition. There were many others who lived even harder lives than his.

For one thing, there was no custom of women's education; on top of that, the village lacked the necessary means. Since contact with the outside world was limited, the village did not feel any great need for formal education either. What was needed was practical knowledge, and that, in some measure, everyone possessed, as they still do. Sulochana never saw the face of a school.

Three years after her marriage, Sulochana's duragaman took place, and she went to her husband's home. After five or six years, she was driven out of her in-laws' house. The reason given was that she had borne no child. Yet no medical examination was ever carried out, nor was it ever established whose fault it was that there was no child.

In society, such things happened quite freely. One woman would be called ugly and pushed out of her husband's home; another would be made to live under the shadow of a co-wife and then driven away, and so on. In a society where the Vedic order had accepted the bond between one man and one woman as the foremost ideal, all sorts of barriers were created to stop women from moving ahead. In the name of omens and ill omens, they were turned into frail, dependent beings and pressed down. If, without searching for the root of such a disease and without making a path of thought from that point, we have reached the twenty-first

century, then one thing is absolutely true: whether one is a lion or a jackal, everyone carries the account of one's own age. To hold them responsible for faults before and after their time would be childish. Yes, if someone has done something with their own hands, they are certainly answerable for it.

Harihar was the kind of man who, if someone plucked a mango from a tree or tore paddy from a field before his eyes, would only warn the child by saying, "Go and tell your father that this boy has torn the paddy and broken off the mango. You will understand when your ear is pulled."

There was a spirit of co-operation in society. Guardians themselves taught their own children. But Harihar's family had one remarkable quality: with four or five Sundays in a month, four or five Mondays with Monday fasts, and many other festival fasts, they had, as it were, shortened the whole year. Saraswati had entered the family. Only Harihar himself had not studied. There was a reason for that too. In a prosperous family, one member had to look after the household and the farming. So, from the beginning, he was not directed towards study.

In course of time, such branches of the family fell behind. That is another matter. There were, of course, some sections of society that prevented situations like the one that befell Sulochana through sheer physical strength. Yet the social cutters, like great rats, kept gnawing at people. They still do. We are diseased by all kinds of divisions between caste and caste, some more, some less. But such crimes did not become social questions; becoming caste questions, they grew weaker. With time, the matter travelled from caste down to the

family. Showing one caste as low, or showing the backward even within one's own caste as beneath the forward, became a means of entertainment.

With the arrival of Saraswati, some newness had indeed entered the thinking of Harihar's family. When Sulochana was driven out of her husband's home, the family accepted her gladly. The reason for accepting her was that everyone in the family admitted their own mistake: they should never have stepped into such a lineage and family. It would not be good even to engage with such people. The father's pampered son took another wife. But Sulochana did not consider herself a widow. She kept the bangles on her wrists.

Time moved forward. Just as Lakshmi comes smiling and cheerful to the threshold, and then even the expenses of toddy and liquor are somehow absorbed, Saraswati too is stubborn and quarrelsome in her own way. She is not like Sulochana, who would quietly take a vow within herself and choose a path to live by. Saraswati is so tenacious that, let alone one co-wife, she would seize thousands of co-wives by the hair, beat them back, and claim her share. Men may say what they like; they cannot diminish the elder woman's elder-born spirit.

The form of Saraswati changed within the family. In place of the Sanskritic order, new methods began to appear. A little of the Sanskritic method remained too, but education was lifted from its very foundation. Sulochana's next younger brother, Jugesar, passed his matriculation from the school at Tamuria. The family was troubled by poverty and unemployment. In search of work, Jugesar went to Calcutta. He stayed there for

two years. The distance of language, the distance between city and village, was obvious. After two years, Jugesar completed teachers' training and became a lower-primary teacher.

Munesar, younger than Jugesar, also passed his matriculation from the same school at Tamuria. There was no provision for science studies at Janata College. Looking for a nearby possibility, he turned towards Khagaria. The Sanskrit school there also arranged food and lodging for students. Kosi College too was there. A student of science, Munesar completed his B.Sc. properly, and in the meantime, his marriage too was settled in the family of an officer.

Harihar's kinship line consisted of four brothers, and the family property had been divided among them. Harihar and his wife both passed away, and now only the families of the two brothers remained.

A year later, Munesar's duragaman took place. After it, Sadhana came to her husband's home. Seeing the way of life there, the house and courtyard, she felt a deep shock within. That was only natural. On one side was an officer's family, and on the other, the farming household of a small, modest village. Yet this did not happen only to Sadhana. It has happened to many others, and still does. Sadhana's parental family, too, belonged to a village, but after securing employment, her father had kept the family with him in Ranchi. He had even bought land there and built a house.

Since her father was an officer, an S.D.O., their standing, relations, and wider connections were certainly more advanced. In her family, among three siblings, Sadhana was the eldest. Being the first-born,

she stood almost like a guardian to the younger two. But a daughter is, after all, a daughter; until marriage and duragaman, she regards her parents' home as her own. Shyamanand, Sadhana's father, had almost severed his ties with his village. To put it plainly, he did have a house-site there, but no house fit to live in. There had once been an ordinary house, but after some time it fell into ruin, and he felt no need to rebuild it.

Until the duragaman, Munesar had not truly borne the burden of family responsibility. But with the arrival of a wife, some accountability was bound to arise. He did not have enough land of his own to earn a livelihood through farming. Alongside this, a serious problem had already taken root in society regarding educated people: if an educated man did not secure a job, he almost inevitably became an object of pity. In village speech there is a saying, "He studies Persian and sells oil; behold, brother, the play of fate." If a man has no land and yet wishes to become a householder and take up farming, even that is no simple matter. The kind of farming needed for a livelihood is not possible for everyone. Land is bought and sold; it is property. Of course, his elder brother Jugesar had a job. He was a Lower Primary teacher, but in those days it was neither a government service as it is now, nor did it offer much of a salary.

Together, the two brothers made a sizeable family. As happens with many educated but unemployed men, Munesar kept thinking of applying for a job here, attending an interview there, and so on.

In rural society then, the number of educated people was small and countable; yet even among those few, there was hardly any hope of employment. Nor

were there government offices as there are now, and even now they are few. In those days, the panchayats were large; among forty or fifty panchayats there would be a single block office and a police station. Government work too was limited, which made entry into service difficult. In the block, there was only one officer, the B.D.O. The workload was slight. Because there was a shortage of grain, relief was distributed, and American wheat was sold through quotas. There was no quota for sugar. One reason was that sugar production was sufficient, and another that there were fewer consumers.

The condition of schools and colleges was similar, like a few huts counted and a little gruel measured out. Only when the teachers then in service retired would new faces enter. People had merely heard the name of a bank, that it was a place where money was deposited and withdrawn.

A few days after the duragaman, Sadhana went to her parental home. Until then, her father, Shyamanand, had not seen his daughter and son-in-law's house and courtyard. Hearing that the boy was a B.Sc. graduate and physically healthy, he had married his daughter to him. At that time, his daughter Sadhana had also passed matriculation. The marriage had taken place at the proper time.

After returning to her parental home, when Sadhana told her mother and father everything about her husband's home, the question of employment for the son-in-law arose in Shyamanand's mind. He called Munesar to Ranchi itself. In conversation with his friends, companions, and close relations, Shyamanand began to speak about finding a job for his son-in-law. He

mentioned it also to the Head of the Chemistry Department at Ranchi University. The two were close friends. Their lodgings too were next to each other. His father-in-law had established a high school in Palamu. True, Palamu was a region of forests and scrub, yet in its own way it was like a small township. He knew that the science teacher at the school had left to take up another job, and that there was now a shortage of a science teacher.

He telephoned his father-in-law and asked him. The school did need a teacher, and Munesar got the job. He was appointed on 1 October 1967. The school had not yet become a government school, but the approval of the Kothari Commission had certainly come through. Munesar obtained employment at a salary of one hundred and five rupees a month.

During the period of his employment, his wife was studying in college, so she stayed at her father's place. Munesar lived alone in Palamu and went to Ranchi during holidays. Besides, a science teacher always has scope for private tuition everywhere, and Munesar too got that opportunity. Given the standard of rural life, and then a job in an undeveloped region, he was able to save well. After some time, Munesar bought land in Ranchi and built a house of his own there. Some rent too began to come from the house. He virtually left his ancestral village behind. From time to time, he would send clothes and money to his sister Sulochana, but there was hardly any coming and going.

For a high school teacher, training was necessary. There was a difference in salary between trained and untrained teachers, and an untrained teacher also faced difficulty in becoming permanent. Two years after

Munesar's appointment, a training course began at Marwari College, Darbhanga. It was a ten-month course. Admission took place through donation. Even after the session had begun, admission continued for six months. Four months later, Munesar too took admission. Within six months he became trained and rejoined at Palamu.

At that time, Bihar included what is now Jharkhand. The state itself was, in effect, divided into two parts. There was a clear difference between North Bihar and South Bihar. In South Bihar, cultivation was limited. Even cultivable soil was scarce. Only a small area was fertile. It was a region of hills and forests. Yet mineral wealth was present in abundance. From coal to mica, there were mines of many kinds. North Bihar, on the other hand, was the plain lying in the basin of the Ganga and the Brahmaputra. There were hardly any hills or forests. Groves and trees were plentiful, but there was no hill timber.

Because of its mineral wealth, South Bihar had a considerable presence of Indian and foreign capital, as well as government enterprises. There were many kinds of minerals, and so business flourished on a wide scale. With Indian and foreign capital, along with public, that is, government enterprises, employment too was available in plenty. But since it was a forested and hilly region, the spread of education among the original inhabitants remained limited. There was hardly any development of workers ranging from ordinary to skilled labourers. They remained largely in the position of unskilled labourers.

North Bihar, however, had advanced in literacy. As a result, the number of skilled workers was greater there. Educated people from North Bihar began to go to

South Bihar for employment, and many built houses and settled there. For the next generation too, a means of livelihood was thus secured.

It was also the misfortune of North Bihar, that is, Mithilanchal, that although it was an agriculture-based region, it had so many hill-fed rivers that they ravaged the land. Broadly, the streams flowed in three forms. Some flowed only during the rainy season and then dried up. Some were comparatively steady; they hardly cut into the land and had flowed in the same course for thousands of years. Others eroded heavily, covering fertile soil with sand and destroying it. Because of them, the fields of village after village were ruined, and homes and courtyards were destroyed. When the basic necessities of life and the productive base itself were damaged, migration began, and it continued.

Even so, because the soil, water, and air of Mithilanchal are favourable, its fertility endures. That is why, however many people have left the villages and settled in different parts of the country and abroad, the population in the village homes remains dense.

Jugesar too worked three kos away from the village and had taken lodgings there. There were reasons for this. There were neither vehicles and transport as there are now, nor were embankments and roads in good condition. Apart from towns and market centres, metalled roads had not reached the villages, nor had electricity. Yet the resolve to drive out the British in 1947 and build an independent country was alive in the mind of every person. The exploitation of colonial rule had damaged the country’s condition and obstructed its development. After independence, the country did take the path of development, but the pace was so uneven

that even sixty or sixty-five years later, farming was still being done by human labour, and fields were irrigated with wooden water-lifts and dhekli-like devices. As a result, although the country was agriculture-based, with more than eighty per cent of its population dependent on it, it remained backward. A handful of capitalists, having captured power, confined economic development to towns and markets.

At the same time, it cannot be denied that many people of Mithilanchal, who sell their labour for the progress of other regions and countries, have also turned away from their own land. The country's power has shifted away from the problems of farmers and has fostered divisions of caste and religion, obstructing real development. The water, soil, and climate of Mithilanchal are so favourable that they support hundreds of kinds of grains, aquatic crops, fruits, vegetables, and greens; they are also suited to countless kinds of birds, small creatures, and animals. Yet, despite having everything, the condition it has reached is plain for all to see.

Jugesar, however, came to the village every weekend, on Saturdays and Sundays. He also came during festival holidays and on other days off. His condition was not such that he could even buy a bicycle. Besides, the family was not very large either. Even so, he himself lived away from home. In the house where he had taken lodging, he taught the children of the family. In return, they provided him with food and a place to live. There was no paid private tuition, and no income other than his salary. The practice of Shanichara had come to an end.

Jugesar's in-laws' home was in Munger district, in a

village of the Ganga diara. Among three brothers, his father-in-law was the eldest. It so happened that the two younger brothers had sons, while he, Jugesar's father-in-law, had only two daughters. The family did not possess a great deal of land, but it did have twenty-five or thirty bighas. The question of the brothers' property became a source of conflict among the three brothers. The two younger brothers said that they would keep coming and going as before. But this was not acceptable to the elder brother, Ramanand. Ramanand's view was that he would give his share to his daughters.

A dispute over land arose among the brothers. The two younger brothers thought that whatever happened, the land would remain in the village; it would not be uprooted and carried away elsewhere. The villagers would buy it, give money, and take it. In every village, there are people skilled in three and thirty kinds of manoeuvres, and they always play their own game. But some caution was exercised. The two brothers called a meeting of the whole village, especially of those known for their clever dealings. In the meeting, they placed their proposal: since their elder brother had no son, it would be the nephews who would serve him in old age; in this way, the honour of the lineage and family would remain safe, and he too would receive service. Why should he wander from village to village in his old age without reason?

The village too found the argument reasonable. But Ramanand was a man of his own mind. He was not ready to listen to anyone, from the family to village society. Annoyed, society told the two brothers that this was a dispute among brothers, and that society would not interfere in it. Seizing the opportunity, the two

brothers asked, “And if someone gets the land written away secretly, like a thief, then what?”

All those seated there sat in the role of Panch-Parmeshwar, as if the village council itself were divine authority. Seeing the thought turn in their favour, they slipped into that same current of agreement and, almost in one voice, said softly but firmly, “Whoever goes outside society will be a daughter.”

At the moment of speaking, everyone spoke. But afterwards, anger began to rise within them against themselves: a cheap thing might slip from their hands. Just as, in the heat of the fire, the jalebi or kachri in an iron pan rises from the oil and separates itself, so Ramanand began to separate from the village. In that village on the bank of the Ganga, people began to rebuke Ramanand openly, to his face. Until now, how had society looked upon you, and what are you eager to do now? Yet none of this had any effect on Ramanand.

Around 1940, Ramanand had passed matriculation. It was a time when thousands of students left schools and colleges, leapt into the freedom movement, and sacrificed everything they had. Ramanand too was a product of that time. He spoke English fluently and forcefully. Many people in government services such as the railways and telegraph left their jobs and offered themselves to the cause.

Ramanand belonged to a middle farming family. The household ran under his father’s supervision, so he was free of responsibility. Roaming here and there and casting idle glances about became the occupation of his life. But just as, when disease enters the body, its strength slowly begins to be consumed, so it began to

happen to Ramanand, from his family to society at large. The nephews who once called him Barka Babu began to abuse him to his face. Human nature is strange. If even a close friend falls into a bad habit, the situation that arises is much like what happened to Ramanand. No one in the village asked him to sit at the threshold; no one was willing to speak with him. It was as if he were living in an open prison.

When disputes arose among the brothers, litigation entered the family. Being weaker in numbers, Ramanand began to lose ground. Before his eyes, his brothers uprooted and cut down crops, trees, and bamboo from his fields.

The two brothers had made up their minds: let him file as many cases as he wished. The police station, too, sensed an opportunity for gain, and matters proceeded accordingly. Calling both daughters and sons-in-law, Ramanand told them all his sorrows and said, "Just as I wish to give all my property to you, so too you should wish to save it and take it."

Just as Ramanand drew strength from his daughters and sons-in-law, so too did people from the village begin to support the two brothers in the lawsuits. Slowly, Ramanand's spirit began to break. For one thing, he had crossed sixty years of age; on top of that, the constant running between the courts and his daughters' and sons-in-law's homes increased so much that he spent more time away than in the village. His wife remained alone in the house, while Ramanand himself, wandering and wearing himself out, grew exhausted.

After some time, his wife fell ill. Neither kinsmen nor anyone from the village came even once to enquire

after her. The two daughters and sons-in-law were not nearby; they lived in a village in the Madhubani district. She received neither timely medical attention nor proper care. After some days, she died.

After his wife's death, Ramanand's life became even more difficult. Whenever he stayed in the village, he had to arrange his own cooking and food. His brothers stopped his income as well. Seeing his poverty and helplessness, the two sons-in-law later tightened their own hands too. Ramanand fell into confusion and distress. He could no longer see any clear path in life.

The last five years of Ramanand's life passed in such a way that people would call it a living hell. Defeated and exhausted, he died after some time. The sons-in-law, along with their visits, also gave up pursuing the cases and litigation. In the end, the case became one-sided.

In Jugesar's village, a dispute arose in another related family among half-brothers. One mother had one son, and the other had four. The four brothers joined together, harassed the fifth brother, their half-brother, and drove him out of the village. For some days, the fifth brother went around among relatives and society, but nothing came of it. In the end, angered, he took out the papers of his father's property from the Collectorate and declared that he would sell his share, even down to the house-site. His share came to nearly a bigha.

There are always people in society ready to eat what comes for free. Three or four families made up their minds to have the land written in their names. But the dispute stood in the way. Among the buyers, the

question arose: this was a dispute over land and property; there would certainly be fighting and beating, and there would certainly be police-station and criminal cases too. There was no telling how far the violence might go, nor how long the trouble would last. So the transaction would have to be made with both things in mind.

In the same way, the landholder, the fifth brother, also had his own question: if he wrote away the land cheaply, what benefit would there be? In that case, it would be better for his own brothers to take it. At least they were of the same family. But there was no shortage of people ready to whisper advice. So much twisted and contrary counsel was poured into his ears that he slipped downward, like poison crackling into the ear of a deaf man.

In the end, the matter was settled: he agreed to have the land written away at half price. The seller, the fifth brother, had been so tormented by the four brothers that his anger would not lessen. Somehow, the land transaction took place at half the price. Among the buyers was Jugesar too.

But his luck was good. Because of his school job, Jugesar himself lived outside the village. Meanwhile, in the village, a fight broke out with another buyer. It was a fierce fight. Heads were split on both sides; arms were broken. Rumour and agitation spread through the whole village. Society became divided into many parts. Some people openly became ready to give evidence in court for both parties. Some even joined in the fighting. Some, looking to their own private interest, kept themselves apart from both sides. But the social creeper

is so tightly wound that even when one has no opinion, circumstances force one to say yes. That happened too. Not only that, the pull of that creeper is such that even within the village, people set up in-laws and maternal relations as supports.

In that very trouble, Jugesar thought of buying eight kathas of land. The two of them, husband and wife, had in fact decided that they would not include Munesar in this land. But the family had not yet been formally divided. Since he was the elder brother, the younger brother's share would naturally arise. So it was necessary to tell him. If he gave half the expense, well and good; if not, at least they would have cleared themselves of blame.

Yet behind this thought, in the belly of the matter, there was this too: Munesar's income was only enough to run his family somehow; where would he bring the money from? At the same time, another thought was working in their minds: since the price had been settled quietly, they could raise it before him. Somehow, because the land was being bought at half price, even four kathas of disputed land would not prove a small gain. Through a postcard, Jugesar informed Munesar. Jugesar knew about the school salary, but he did not know about the income from tuition. Along with this, Munesar's wife also advised him that the utensils given from her parental home were lying uselessly about the house; they could sell them and buy the land.

Until then, the old relationship between the two brothers was still alive. Munesar agreed to pay half the cost. The land would be registered by Jugesar in the names of both brothers.

Seeing his own weaker side, Jugesar and his wife

considered the matter and decided that it would be better to have the land written in their son's name.

Munesar had no idea of this. In those days, the registration office was not as it is now, where the person in whose name the land is being written must also be present. Anyone could have land registered in someone else's name. Besides, the deed would be received five or seven years later; by then, the matter would have grown old. Even then, the papers would come to light only if someone searched for them. If no one searched, who would know? There had been no separation of households, nor had the fields and lands been divided. Since they were living in the village, cultivation was somehow being managed through others. The matter would not come out, so why should there be quarrelling, taunts, or uproar? When they separated, then it would be known.

Understanding the favourable turn of thought, Jugesar had all eight kathas of land registered in his son's name. Later, this became explosive between the two brothers.

After some years, the secret of the registration came out. As soon as it did, discord and bitterness began between the two families, that is, between the two brothers. Two kinds of discord arose. One was between Munesar and his wife; the other was within Jugesar's side.

Jugesar's wife had already seen the game of her father's property, where, even though there was a rightful share, no share had been received. So she put pressure on her husband, saying that whatever had happened was for the best; in other words, it was good

that the land had been registered in the son's name. But in Jugesar's mind, the fear of having cheated his brother and of becoming guilty in society began to dance at once. His son, however, had also grown up. Taking it as his own particular share, he too stood behind his mother.

On the other side, Munesar remained patient, looking at his income. His income had become quite good. After the school was taken over by the government, he had a decent salary; private tuition fees had also increased, bringing him greater earnings, and on top of that, rent from the Ranchi house was being added. But Sadhana's hunger grew still fiercer. Besides, the utensils given by her father and mother had been sold. Open disagreement began between husband and wife. Their conversation took this form. Trying to make his wife understand, Munesar said, "Look, we have a house of our own in a city like Ranchi. There is no question of living in the village. In that case, let them cultivate the land and eat from it too."

Cutting across Munesar's view, Sadhana put forward her economic argument, "When we are not going to live in the village, why should we keep village property as dead capital? If we sell it and deposit the money in the bank, we will earn interest. Or else, if we build another house here, that too will bring rent."

Changing his ground, Munesar argued, "If we sell even the house-site of our fathers and forefathers, then with what face shall we live? Is our need so desperate that we must sell it?"

In the end, it was decided that the village fields would be mortgaged and the money deposited in the

bank. But the dispute among the brothers still remained.

After some days, husband and wife came to the village and placed before Jugesar the proposal of dividing everything, from the ancestral house-site and homestead to the fields and embanked lands.

Jugesar too agreed to divide everything except the disputed land that had been registered. A one-eyed uncle is better than none. Leaving aside the disputed land, Munesar divided the rest.

In Harihar's brotherhood there were two and a half kathas of house-site. When divided, it came to six and a quarter dhurs each.

At the time when Sulochana had come from her husband's home to her parental home, the country was passing through the stormy phase of the freedom movement. The repression of 1942 had begun. People from the surrounding region had come out onto the roads against British rule. Jhanjharpur had become a base for British troops. Many villages were set on fire. Many people were working underground. Many were beaten repeatedly and imprisoned. But the shameful thing was that several families from this very area supported the British government. Along with arranging their lodging and food, they also looted property.

In the village, there were many women like Sulochana Bahin who had been driven out of their husbands' homes. Some lived with their parents, brothers, and sisters-in-law; some lived alone, earning their livelihood through daily labour. Some had children, and some did not.

From the beginning, both in principle and in

practice, the bond between one man and one woman had certainly existed. Yet some deficiencies remained in carrying the family forward. That deficiency lay in the make-up of the human body. The constitution of every body is not the same. In most cases, the power of procreation has remained similar, yet alongside it there have also been degrees of lack and excess. In some cases the weakness lay in a man, in others in a woman. Similarly, in some cases there was greater potency in a man, and in others in a woman. Of course, when a man was impotent, the custom of kshetraja children had existed. But when a woman was incapable, an obstacle necessarily arose in carrying the family forward. In such a situation, the support of another woman became necessary. If that did not happen, the family would come to an end. Not only would it end, old age and illness would also become painful.

But essential necessity begins to move towards comfort and luxury when the tendency towards pleasure and indulgence grows stronger. Through this, distortion takes shape within society and the family. That is what happened. Among the advanced sections of society, especially the economically advanced, and even among middle-class families, marrying more than once was very much in practice. This dealt a severe blow to the custom of one man and one woman. Yet, however strong the blow, the order was not completely destroyed.

In the lower classes too, the disease entered, though in another form. In the royal order, some families were connected from top to bottom, and among those families it was the result of a pleasure-seeking, indulgent mentality; among the poor, the reason was

the pain of the stomach. There was no small number of men who, because they were work-shy, lazy, addicted to intoxicants, and so on, could not keep a wife. By not keeping her, what is meant is that they could not provide for her maintenance. But even that was not the whole truth. There were many women who worked like men. In their hearts, they held boundless reverence for their husbands and a firm resolve; they had placed all the happiness of their lives in their husbands.

The practice of marrying more than once grew worse day by day. Many kinds of foul diseases began to take birth. The thinking of men took such a disgusting form that they began to marry by the dozen. Along with this, there remained no proper age limit for men either. Even at an age that was no age for marriage, they began to marry. As a result, they themselves would die after a short while, and women would be turned into widows in the very bloom of youth. Within widowhood, such circumstances arose that it became a disease of society.

Still, it cannot be said that men alone committed injustice against women in every possible way. Disease entered the relationship between man and woman from both sides. In some places force was used, and in some places there were bodily relations between men and women as well.

The question arises: such a heavy blow fell upon the original tradition, the Vedic tradition, and did all men and women simply keep looking at one another's faces? Here, one must also see that neither the way of living, food habits, speech, and thought of every village are of one kind, nor is the process of social development the same everywhere. There are many reasons why it is not the same. For one thing, society was divided into small

kingdoms. As the kingdom was, so were the rulers. Mithilanchal too was divided into several zamindaris and states. Each had its own manner of rule, and with it a different framework for managing social order. There were differences according to region as well. Differences in food habits and in the system of earning existed earlier too, and they exist even now.

Even today, there are regions where no flood has cut or eroded the land, nor covered it with sand; as a result, the fields and homesteads there have remained unaffected. But there is no shortage of regions where fertile land has turned into stream-beds and been buried under sand. Villages that were once beautiful places to live have been ruined. How can a human being live without grain and water? This was a question then, and it remains one even now.

Another thing happened as well. Wherever the family rested upon the bond between man and woman, there, because the system was male-dominated, women were driven out of the house under many false pretexts. One was accused of lacking the power to bear children, another was called characterless, and in this way, by attaching one allegation or another, women were separated from the home. This happened then, and it still happens.

The problems of the village, along with the conduct of his brother, continued to deepen the rift between Munesar and his wife. The separation of the two brothers also divided Sulochana. Until then, she had stood between both brothers, but after the division she moved away from Jugesar and came to Munesar's side. Jugesar stopped cultivating Munesar's fields.

When his brother stopped cultivating the land, the problem of farming arose for Munesar. The reason was clear. He and his wife both lived away from the village, and their visits there were almost non-existent. Since they did not live in the village, how could they keep cattle with which farming could be done? Besides, even outside the village, Munesar and his wife did not live together in one place. Sadhana lived in Ranchi with the children and also worked in a high school, while Munesar lived alone in Palamu. The distance between them was considerable, and even during school holidays, tuition work remained. So his visits to Ranchi too were limited. The distance in life had created a distance in thought. Where Sadhana lacked close familiarity with her husband's family, Munesar, before his brother, regarded the land as a secondary matter.

Clearly, differences between husband and wife continued to grow. Sadhana stood firm on her right and her share, while Munesar hesitated to move forward. In the end, one day both became ready for a decision. The exchange between them went like this.

Sadhana said, "When we gave your brother half the expense for buying the land, why did he act dishonestly and get it registered in his son's name?"

Munesar was silenced by Sadhana's strong argument. Yet, presenting himself as generous, he replied, "If my brother did act dishonestly, what harm has it done to me?" ❑

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The ancestral land was divided between Jugesar and Munesar, but the land bought recently was not divided. The division between the two brothers divided Sulochana Bahin as well. Sulochana Bahin went with Munesar.

With the division of land, the problem of cultivation arose. Jugesar kept an ox, arranged a ploughing pair, and began to cultivate his own land. Munesar did receive fields, but he had no arrangement for farming. He and his family lived away from the village.

The division of fields created a major problem. The difficulty was that, in middle-level families, fields are divided in two ways. The first is that, without putting a ridge through each field, people divide them field by field. In such a division, if a boundary ridge does not pass through every single field, then whole fields are divided as they are. The second way is that, whether the field is small or large, each field itself is divided.

Yet both kinds of division are diseased. One disease comes from the fertility of the land and the nature of the soil. For instance, in the same village, in one stretch of land, there are low, middle, and high

fields. In a low-lying field, if water remains standing for many days, only one crop is possible. Even that is not certain. If heavy rain comes early, the field will not be cultivated at all. And even if it is cultivated, there is no certainty about the water. If a sudden heavy downpour comes early, even the transplanted crop sinks. Once the seedlings themselves are drowned, there can be no question of yield.

But in medium land, by all reckoning, the yield is better, and good varieties of crop can also be grown, such as lighter paddy, satariya, and tulsiphool. In such places, problems are bound to arise. Alongside this, on higher land, orchards and plantations can be raised, and rainy-season vegetables can also be grown; this is not possible in middle and low fields.

In the second kind of division, another problem arises. A piece of land measuring one bigha, as it passes through three generations, descends from bigha to katha and then reaches the level of dhur. For example, if in the first generation there are four brothers, one bigha is divided into five kathas each. If in the second generation again there are four brothers, the share becomes one katha and five dhurs. And if in the third generation there are even two brothers, it becomes twelve and a half dhurs. Whatever the case may be, society has done justice with both systems. Both customs are current from village to village, and everyone accepts them.

Jugesar and Munesar divided the land after quarrelling. Ridges were drawn through field after field, and the map of the land became such that what had once been the furrow of a plough came down to the work of a spade. On one side, large tractors are now

coming to plough broad fields; on the other, fields have been cut into such tiny pieces that if a tractor cannot even fit into them, what will it plough? What use is a ripe bael fruit to a crow?

There are, however, two kinds of sharecroppers in society. One kind keeps his own plough and oxen, ploughs himself, and cultivates land on share. Such a man has a little land of his own along with some belonging to others. Farming today is taking such a form that, once the land becomes multi-crop instead of single-crop, the demand for ploughing increases. Year-round farming has also begun to take place, and this is the very summit of agricultural progress. When farming continues throughout all twelve months, environmentalists will, without effort, receive their share of oxygen.

The second kind of sharecropper is one who works as a labourer himself and also does a little farming. Broadly speaking, such people cultivate with the spade.

After the division between the two brothers, Munesar had thought that his sister would look after the fields and that his elder brother would cultivate them, giving her a share of the produce. He believed that, after all, the sister belonged to both brothers; even if his brother considered it as his own help to her and gave her the full produce, it would ease her passage through life.

But Sulochana Bahin had already sown the seed of quarrel. She had done so in this way: after the land was bought, she spoke from Munesar's side, saying, "When both brothers paid equally to buy the field, why should there not be a share?" Poor woman, by her own words, she moved away from one brother and came closer to

the other.

Jugesar too, after receiving government recognition, saw his salary increase, and with that he bought a house-site and built a proper pucca house. Sulochana Bahin consoled herself: as long as Queen Sita remained in Janakpur, she was only a daughter, and a daughter's importance in a family is less; when the time came for the royal throne, she was sent to the forest, and even there she was separated from her husband and brother-in-law and taken to Lanka. Did she then live in Ravan's capital? No, she lived in the Ashoka grove. In the same way, I too shall live.

Jugesar stepped back from cultivating the fields on share. Such sharecroppers came that they could not cultivate on time, and as a result, the yield became uncertain. But Sulochana Bahin held on to her father's and forefathers' homestead.

When the school received deficit grant status, Munesar's salary increased as well. Along with that, since he was a capable teacher, his tuition work also grew, and his income rose considerably. He had already built his own house in Ranchi. In the village, the dispute among the brothers remained suspended, but the distance between Munesar and his wife continued to grow. By nature, the two were different. One was so confident in his own labour that he would think: what is property? If a month's income is lost, I shall take it as if I had not earned for a month. At least this much will happen: I shall remain honourable in the eyes of society, and the stain within the family will lessen. The bond of brotherhood will remain intact. What does it matter if one gives up a house-site? Even I, who call myself a villager, have built a house in another region. Still,

brotherhood is brotherhood.

Between the two brothers stood two daughters from different parental homes. Both brothers were afflicted by this condition, and there were reasons for it. In Jugesar's case, the greed for property from his wife's parental side operated under her influence; in Munesar's case, it arose because the son of an ordinary farming family had been married to the daughter of an administrative officer. However much one may argue, it cannot be denied that in most families of Mithilanchal, women do not openly exercise authority in words. What it is, how much it is, and in what form it exists is another matter; yet it cannot be said that the cohesion of the family is not in women's hands.

Munesar, however, kept his character restrained to a great extent. He educated his son in a good school. From his own earnings, he derived such contentment that he came to feel life was not an unbearable burden. Even so, disagreement between husband and wife over the village property continued to smoulder like the slow fire of rice husk. Whatever the case, he continued to look after Sulochana Bahin.

Land, too, is a kind of net. Jugesar had already secured the first four kathas; then his in-laws' property drew him in. After that, he fell into a third net, of ten kathas. The matter was this: two brothers of Pahipatti had house-site and garden land together, ten kathas in one place. Jugesar settled the price with both brothers, and it was agreed. One brother took the money and registered the land. The other began to haggle. Another buyer appeared. For the same family land, the price demanded by one brother became one and a half times higher for the other. The second man, Ramkisun, not

only refused half but took possession of the entire field. In the use of force, Jugesar proved weak. He withdrew and went to court. Cases began, but the land remained in the possession of the one who had seized it.

After some days, Jugesar's son, who had passed matriculation, wrote a postcard filled with abusive language and sent it to Ramkisun. As soon as Ramkisun received the letter from the post office, he began showing it to people. It had been a hidden matter; therefore, the question arose as to who had written it. The man who received the letter suspected there was no one else who could have written it. He had no quarrel with anyone else. The dispute over the field was with Jugesar, so it must have been Jugesar's son who had written it.

Jugesar's son, Radha, was also in the village. The houses of both families were in the same locality, so they saw each other regularly. Ramkisun caught hold of Radha and beat him severely.

An arson case had once been filed over the zamindar's land in the village, in which twenty-eight people were accused. Jugesar's dispute too became entangled with that same zamindar's land. The spark of the police station was always present in the village. The incident did take place, and the zamindar extended his influence as well. Jugesar also involved the leading villagers. Heavy litigation followed, and the dispute went as far as the High Court. Yet Jugesar never gained possession of the land.

The disagreement between Munesar and his wife did not lessen; it continued to grow. One day, scolding Munesar, his wife said, "If you cannot take possession of

the field, I shall go and do it myself."

Seeing Sadhana's fierce form, Munesar remained silent. He said nothing, but he could see the dispute rolling forward before him. The immediate silence held it back for a few days, but it could not stop it.

It was the day of Phagua. Munesar too had come with his wife and sons, gathering from different places. Ordinarily, one son lived in a residential school, his wife in Ranchi, where she taught at the high school, and Munesar himself in Palamu. Their meetings and exchanges took place mostly through letters. Holi in Ranchi, in the Adivasi region, with the heat and throb of drums and shields, made the whole area resound. Munesar's family had eaten malpua, and there was, as usual, an afternoon sitting. A conversation arose between Sadhana and Munesar. Both sons were nearby. The talk turned to the share in the four kathas of land in the village.

Sadhana said, "Just as he did not allow me to enjoy the property of my parental home, I too shall not allow him to enjoy this."

Hearing his wife's blow, Munesar writhed inwardly. It was true that the poor woman's ornaments and utensils from her parental home had been swept away. Like Yudhishthir, Munesar listened to his wife's attack, and also thought within himself that such a thing should not happen among brothers. An elder brother is not merely like a father; he is like a fatherly preceptor. If such a thing happens between brothers born of the same parents, how will a Ram-Lakshman bond ever be formed? This is plainly a Ravan-Vibhishan bond.

There was already the warmth of Phagua, and on

top of that, the malpua added its own force. Sadhana repeated, stirred and excited, “If I too am my father’s daughter, I shall teach him a lesson.”

Both sons remained silent. Seeing their father’s helpless condition and their mother’s form, they wandered inwardly for no reason. Barka Babu, Jugesar, had cut all our throats, and why does Father say nothing?

But Munesar’s mind remained fixed on his elder brother’s conduct. His wife had become Rann-Chandi herself; if he tried to restrain her, would she stop? In terms of family, there certainly was distance between his wife and his elder brother. Food habits, conduct, thought, social customs and practices all differed. But I am not like that, he thought.

He remembered his father. Both brothers were sons of the same parents. If his elder brother had been uneducated, he would have understood that it was a matter between ignorance and awareness, and that finding a remedy would be the task of the aware one. But where I am a teacher, and my brother too is a teacher, where our very profession is the same, why did such a thought arise in his mind? Yet how could he say to his elder brother, “Brother, you are acting dishonestly”? If he made him out to be dishonest, he himself would needlessly begin to be called dishonest.

His brother lived in the village, among society, and with his salary increased, he even carried on lending and small-money dealings. But I am not there. What is to be done in such a place? I have never seen the face of courts and offices. Nor am I free. I am employed; my leave is counted. During festival holidays, the courts and offices

too remain closed. Had my job been nearby, I could have managed both things somehow, by adjustment and compromise. But that too is not the case. It is a journey of twenty-four hours. A single day's work would take three days. And then there are all the troubles and complications; there is no knowing how long it would take. A settled life would break apart.

A turn came in Munesar's mind: it was only four kathas of land, and he was not going to cultivate it with his own hands. To make property a matter of prestige would be childish. But would his wife agree? Just then, Sadhana burst out again: "Fix a time. Let both of us go. If we die, we shall die together; if we live, we shall live together."

Helpless, Munesar fixed a time to go to the village. After submitting an application for leave at the school, both husband and wife set out. At Sakri, Munesar said to his wife, "I shall go via Madhubani, to my sister's place, and return the day after tomorrow. You go ahead."

That is what happened. Sadhana went to the village, and Munesar went to Madhubani.

As soon as she reached the village, Sadhana marked out the boundaries. There was no shortage of people skilled in all kinds of manoeuvres. Offering her advice about advance and retreat, they pushed her onto the field of action. The next morning, at about seven o'clock, Sadhana reached Jugesar's threshold.

Jugesar too was at the threshold, while his wife, children, and family were in the courtyard. Seeing Sadhana, Jugesar thought that since she had come to the village, she must have come to meet everyone. She would go into the courtyard and greet them all. Sitting

on the cot, Jugesar lowered his eyes. Sadhana stood firmly at the threshold and said, “I have business with you.”

Startled, Jugesar said, “What?”

“The land in which you have kept my share, divide it and give it.”

Jugesar said, “Which land? The land in which you had a share has already been divided.”

“The land that was bought.”

“That is in Radha’s name. How can you have a share in it?”

“Was my money not used in buying it?”

The noise at the door reached the courtyard. Everyone came out to the threshold. Somni began to answer Sadhana’s question:

“If it was your money, would it not have been in your own name?”

Sadhana said, “How was I to know that he was such a throat-cutting brother that he would cut our throats?”

Somni replied, “Is he a greater throat-cutter than your own husband?”

“What throat has he cut?”

As the exchange continued, tempers rose. The four of them, on Jugesar’s side, surrounded Sadhana as if ready to beat her. Sadhana understood that she might indeed be beaten. Better, then, to step back. Moving backwards, she said, “I am going now. I shall return at twelve, and the matter will be settled then.”

As Sadhana left, Jugesar and his entire side came to a standstill. Like a returning wedding procession, Sadhana continued to make her presence felt, and so

did Jugesar's whole family.

The male members of the related families kept their mouths covered, but for the women, it was as if the month of Agahan had arrived. They began to recount village tales and old stories to both Sadhana and Somni.

Every member of Jugesar's family felt that Sadhana had come to the threshold and insulted them. Yet it escaped their notice that Sadhana, whose ornaments, utensils, and everything from her parental home had been sold away, could not quietly accept the matter. Jugesar and his wife themselves had experienced the loss of property from his in-laws' side: the rightful share of the father-in-law had slipped away. Money had been spent in court, and nothing had come of it. The same, they believed, would happen here. Radha, too, was foolish and reckless. He suggested to his father that they should kill her outright. Though Jugesar had been a teacher all his life, he agreed with his son's thought.

At twelve o'clock, Sadhana arrived in a fierce mood. Father and son had already made up their minds. As soon as she came, they seized her. They made a serious attempt to kill her, but it did not succeed.

Raising an uproar, Sadhana went to the police station and had Jugesar arrested. Yet nothing came of the dispute. Munesar received the news in Madhubani itself that a serious incident had taken place in the village. In such a situation, going straight to the village would not be wise. But not going at all would not be proper either. Munesar fell into confusion.

A new incident had taken place in the village. The villagers had, in a way, grown accustomed to courts, police cases, and prison, so there was not much

commotion. But since such an incident had happened to a woman, it certainly became a subject of discussion.

One of Sadhana's close relations was an officer in Andhara Block. Instead of going from Madhubani to the village, Munesar went to Andhara. The two of them considered the matter and decided that going to the village would not be as wise as calling Sadhana there. From there, they would go straight to Ranchi. That is what happened. On the fourth day, Munesar and his wife left for Ranchi.

The quarrel over four kathas of land between the two brothers, Jugesar and Munesar, grew into a dense entanglement. Munesar's mind became so knotted on all sides that a heavy burden settled upon it. Illnesses began to enter his body. Blood pressure and diabetes struck with such force that he had to seek treatment. The weight pressing upon him from every direction was this: on one side, he felt joy that his elder son, Raghunath, had secured a job in a bank and that the school had become a government school; on the other, the conflict with his wife and his brother twisted his heart. His wife's open opposition stood before him plainly.

Within the family of four–Munesar, Sadhana, and their two sons–two opposing camps of thought emerged. Raghunath was not only Munesar's son but also his educated pupil. With a bank job, a shift in values had naturally come over him. This change was that, in feudal thinking, land and property are regarded as honour and prestige, and people are ready even to lose their lives for them. But in a more modern, economic way of thinking, land and property are seen as capital. Prestige, however, is connected with one's conduct in

life, and wealth is only a means to support that conduct.

Thus, Raghunath regarded those four kathas merely as capital worth forty thousand rupees, not even equal to fifteen days' earnings for father and son combined. For such a matter, his mother had become emotional and abused Barka Babu to his face; this, he felt, was not right. She should also have kept their fathers and forefathers in mind, and this she had failed to do. In such an educated family, such an incident should not have occurred. It was not proper.

Alongside this, he also knew his father's family, his own lineage. Both his father and his uncle were teachers; before them, in the previous generation too, two brothers had been teachers. One was a teacher of the Vedas in a Sanskrit college, the other in a middle school. Both the maternal and paternal families belonged to educated lineages. In such a situation, being a woman, his mother should not have taken such a step. Had it been a matter between men, we would have understood it. Besides, in Mithila there is even a custom of giving the eldest brother an eldest share. How much was four kathas of land, after all? Being his nephew, I earn in a month what he does not earn. It is not proper either that his son should wander through courts and offices, wasting himself so easily. Nor is it right that between two brothers, one should become powerful and the other destitute. In that case, which way will the family cart move, towards poverty or towards power?

Raghunath's childlike mind, clear like the water of a pond or a hill stream, like water filtered through sand, bent more towards his father. Because Munesar

possessed an intellectual family culture, he did not want bitterness to enter brotherhood for the sake of four kathas of land. Because of this, his disagreement with his wife continued. Raghunath stood behind Munesar. The younger son too worked in a bank. The three, father and sons, shared one line of thought, and so their agreement was greater.

Yet the distance in their lives was not small for any of them. Both sons and the wife lived in their own lodgings, each about a hundred kilometres away. The fragrance of the ancestral homestead no longer belonged to either of the two brothers in the same way. One who has houses on two house-sites and yet spends life in rented accommodation, what value can a homestead hold for him? Still, before his employment, Munesar had lived in the village house and homestead, and therefore his leaning towards the village was stronger. The house he had built in Ranchi was, after all, a place where one merely lived for a few days; for that reason, his attachment to the village was greater than his attachment to Ranchi.

As a cow tied at the trough nudges and pushes another cow with its muzzle until it stumbles, so it happened with Sadhana within the family. What guardian of a family would take the matter of a family incident before his own children? On one side there was a mind free of deceit and cunning; on the other, in the very same incident, the mother and father held two different views.

Sadhana's heart accepted that, like her husband, her sons too stood outside her way of thinking. Besides, having lived in Ranchi since childhood, Sadhana was

more drawn towards Ranchi. On top of that, the guardianship of her husband's earnings was in her hands. There was also this: Sadhana herself worked in a new school, where there was no salary yet; she worked in the hope of what might come later. As the salary, so the work; therefore, there was no burden of work upon her.

When the time came to buy land in Ranchi, Munesar's contribution was only money. The rest, from settling the price and terms to choosing the place and all such matters, had been done by Sadhana herself. After the land came into view, a large question arose. The question was this: once something is done, it is done. If, later on, they wished to take more land, first it would be more expensive, and secondly the land would be scattered here and there, not in one place. Better, then, even if the house were to be built some days later, to first secure the land properly. Why would it take time to accept a well-considered idea? They bought ten kathas of land.

After buying the land, building a house on ten kathas was no small task. Under his wife's pressure, Munesar began to labour day and night. Yet there was a quality in his character: even in such a difficult time, when he was responsible for checking Board examination answer scripts, he resisted the temptation of easy money and held fast to the honour of his lineage. The strain of constant labour turned Munesar into a house of disease. Sadhana, however, remained in a comparatively stable position. The bank incomes of both sons had begun to come into her hands.

One day, suddenly, Munesar felt pain in his

stomach. At the doctor's, it was found that an operation on the pancreas would be necessary. Along with that, he would require a month's bed rest. But the pain was such that, without the operation, he could not survive. In the end, the operation was carried out in Hyderabad. Since the expense was considerable, it did create some strain on their progress. Besides, age had advanced, and various ailments had already taken hold of his body.

The dispute between the two brothers, Jugesar and Munesar, now came into the open. Jugesar's son, who had filed a case after the beating, implicated not only those directly involved but also people from the wider community. He pursued the case so aggressively that by the very next morning, police from four stations had reached the village. There was great turmoil. People ran about, and there were clashes and counter-clashes. Two people were even sent to jail. Soon afterwards, the property of the remaining accused was attached and seized. This provoked a strong reaction in the community. Jugesar began to be abused openly. His humiliation deepened to the point that he himself began to feel it keenly. As people say, one's own village grove can become frightening, and another village's pond too can become frightening; in the same way, his own village had become a place of fear for him. Earlier, he would come even in the dead of night without hesitation; now, that was no longer possible. As fear grew within Jugesar, his family too felt its effects.

Alongside this, there was another matter. The disputed land, which four men had earlier bought together, became a cause of violence when they attempted to take possession. They fought, beat one another, and became entangled in cases. Jugesar

escaped direct involvement. The incident had occurred during school hours, and in that too, he managed to keep himself apart. Even so, possession of the land was eventually taken. The split among them occurred because those against whom the case had been filed demanded that Jugesar bear his share of the legal expenses; when he did not, the break followed.

Munesar's operation was successful, but the doctor advised him to rest for six months. Caught between life and death, his mind was shaken to its depths. On one side, looking at his own earnings and those of his sons, the future seemed secure; on the other, seeing his physical condition, a troubling question arose in his mind: "How will I be looked after?"

His wife too was a wife after all, like a bird flying in the sky. If he earned and placed the money in her hands, and went on obeying her commands, all would be very well; otherwise, she would keep herself ready to be called the wife of a wretched, ill-fated man. Was this a natural thought for a human being? No, this was merely weakening one's own strength. Savitri and Satyavan stood before his eyes. Well, his wife could look towards the remainder of his service and the hope of his pension; he could find comfort in the fact that his sons were earning. But what would happen to Barki Bahin? Poor woman, though she had brothers, no brother had truly remained a brother to her; though she had a husband, no husband had truly remained a husband. At home there was not enough property; and even if she had the right to sell anything, perhaps there might have been some hope of living a little longer. But she did not have that either.

The time was harsh, like blazing sun. He himself

was lying in bed; he had no income in hand. How could he ask his sons? Did they not know there were expenses for his sister too? Yet if he asked, and if they told their mother, then whatever hope he had of living for a few more days would also vanish. It is from insult and humiliation that people swallow poison.

Pressing his own thoughts down within his mind, Munesar began to forget his sister.

For a month or two, Sulochana kept holding on to hope. But the fire of the stomach is such a fire that, to put it out, people forget conduct, thought, lineage, and family honour, everything. Sulochana had been born into a family where women were forbidden from cutting or breaking the soil; how, then, could she sell her labour? She had no little garden or patch of land of her own where she could grow even enough greens for herself. The fields lay out in the embanked stretch. Helpless, Sulochana sat in her broken hut in the village and began to sing, “O Bhola Dani, when will you take away my sorrow?”

Seeing all four paths closed around her, Sulochana Bahin looked ahead and remembered a house nearby. It was the house of her elder sister and brother-in-law. The brother-in-law had died, but her sister was still alive, confined to bed. Her sister’s house was close to the village, about a kos away. In the afternoon, Sulochana Bahin took the road to her sister’s place.

Seeing Sulochana Bahin, not only her sister’s family but also the women from the neighbourhood gathered around. Quietly, bringing her mouth close to her sister’s ear, Sulochana said in a slightly raised voice,

“Didi, I am hungry.”

Hearing Sulochana Bahin’s words, her sister understood that this was not hunger from the road; she had come hungry from home.

Seeing Sulochana’s beautiful face faded like a broken flower, her sister said to her daughter-in-law, “Daughter-in-law, Sulochana must be hungry from the journey. First give her something to drink.”

In any case, it is the custom of village society that when a guest arrives at the threshold, water is first placed before them. People do not really regard the homes of one’s own people, of maternal kin, of an aunt, or of an elder sister as separate from one’s own. One may stay there for a whole month and no one remarks that it has been too long. Besides, Sulochana Bahin had found her old sister, and why only Sulochana? Her sister too needed someone to attend to her. With the burden on the household reduced in that way, the people of the house were happy as well. It was a well-settled family; there was no problem of food and drink. In such houses, even the mice eat more than the food of ten people.

Sulochana’s cousin, the son of her paternal aunt, was a teacher in a high school, a respected man. Throughout his life, he had never taken tuition fees from any student at his lodging. With Sulochana Bahin staying nearby, his attention fell upon her condition. From her own lips, he heard everything about her parental family. He already knew something about her husband’s home as well. A concern arose in his mind: though her husband was alive, the poor woman was living the life of a widow.

Grasping the root of the matter, he set about addressing it. Sulochana’s husband had taken a second

wife, and from that marriage he had four children. Yet, despite everything, the problem could still be resolved. Master Sahib also consulted the kinsmen in the village. He did so because, if there was no settlement with the husband's family, another option would certainly be needed. Here, in his own home, she might stay for six months, perhaps a year at most; but she could not remain there for life. All kinds of talk would inevitably arise. From the kinsmen, he learnt that the women there would not easily allow Sulochana Bahin to settle. Still, she could at least live on what was rightfully hers.

Through Master Sahib's efforts, Sulochana Bahin went to her husband's home. Returning after the age of sixty, worn down and defeated by life, she tied what remained of her days to five mouthfuls of grain and five cubits of cloth. She lived in her husband's home for two years. Just as thoughts begin to change with advancing age, a change came in Sulochana Bahin as well. But the affection that women receive in their husband's home–through their children, the gardens and flower-beds they have planted, and the house and courtyard they have built–she did not receive. However many step-sons and step-daughters there were, they did not regard her as their own. They had all grown shrewd and saw her as a stepmother. The same was true of her husband.

Even so, having found a farming family with ten bighas of land, Sulochana Bahin felt some measure of happiness. The family too understood that no outsider had come.

Sulochana Bahin's heart began to believe that life might now pass with some ease. At the time of death, if there were sharp pain, she would endure it. But that

moment was still far away. For now, she felt strong enough to live another twenty-five or thirty years. Even a single day of life can seem like a mountain to a person.

After returning to her husband's home, what pleased Sulochana Bahin most was that the life which had become a kind of widowhood, despite her husband being alive, had suddenly changed. Of course, widowhood has no fixed boundary. For shorter or longer periods, many women pass through such a state in one form or another. But is everyone's life the same? Society too is varied. In one place, seeing a widow's face before setting out is considered inauspicious; in another, it is considered auspicious. A widow's life, too, takes many such forms.

In society, there are two forms of a woman without a husband. One arises after the husband's death; the other when she is abandoned while he is still alive. According to age, circumstance, and social change, widowhood takes on many colours; but here, only the broader outline is being described.

From today's point of view, marriages have begun to take place at around twenty years of age or later. Even so, differences remain, as the age of kanyadan is not the same in every family. In educated and advanced families, where marriage takes place after one has become a doctor, an engineer, or obtained some such degree, it is often tied to employment, making livelihood the basis. This, too, is in keeping with the times. Around the time of marriage, such a process has developed that there is repeated coming and going, and the associated rituals continue over several occasions. Madhushravani, Kojagara, and similar observances stand clearly before us.

Interruptions naturally arise in the midst of study. Because of them, like counted huts and measured gruel, preparation for the course and completion of the syllabus are bound to fall short. Not only that, this is also a stage of life where thought begins to mature into intellect. Through stories and experiences of many kinds, such vivid forms of life come into view that some shock or awakening is inevitable. On one side stands such a turning point in life where the first step must be crossed; in the next step, one may cross firmly, or slip and fall backwards, or fall in such a way that one may never rise again.

In another kind of family, where higher education is absent, the marriage of sons and daughters is regarded as a necessary family duty, something to be performed at the proper time, or even before it. There is a reason for this. In the inherited tradition, marriage may take place at any age, from childhood to adulthood, but children are expected at the proper time. To arrange marriage on time or even early was considered a positive approach. In such families, or in those even more backward, the marriage of daughters, from childhood up to the age of fifteen or sixteen, still occurs. Child marriage is certainly not good. But why is it not good? It is true that if the seed of certain crops is cast into water, it is wasted. But can the same be said of things that grow in water, such as makhana or singhara?

The marriage of sons and daughters still stands in society as an essential duty of parents, and rightly so. In families whose lives, because of poverty, have no certainty at all, do serious illnesses not arise? If they do, can such families afford treatment? In farming villages, do all fields belong only to the local cultivators, or do

some belong to landlords or farmers from other villages with larger holdings? Even after proper expenditure on cultivation, how much share does the actual cultivator receive? Whether it is rearing cattle or growing crops, if the cost exceeds half the produce, what benefit remains if the cultivator receives only half or even less?

In such a condition of society, what assurance does life hold beyond invoking Sita-Ram? In such circumstances, if parents relieve themselves of the burden of marrying off their young children, can they be entirely blamed?

Of course, widowhood cannot be accepted as a social law; yet it cannot be denied that it exists in social practice. In certain families, there are problems so severe that to accept them in the twenty-first century is nothing but cowardice. Whatever the case, it remains a social problem. If a girl of twelve or fourteen becomes a widow, what kind of life will she have? That is an age that has not yet met the spring breeze. And after widowhood, that very breeze arrives. It is an age difficult to direct. On one side, she is cast out by family and society; on the other, the flame of life's spring burns. What will happen in such a condition? The companions and girlhood friends with whom she had laughed and joked until then either stop speaking before the widow or are kept away from her. Does the loss of a husband, the husband of the marital bond, mean the loss of family too? Does life too disappear along with society? Yet it does disappear.

What fault is there in that milk-mouthed child, to whom people will say to her face, "I saw your face and went to gamble, and lost both house and homestead"?

As long as society does not create social bonds

suited to the times and live by them, society will have no real existence. Just as a ripe jackfruit falling from a tree scatters on the ground, its seeds flying one way, its pods another, its rag somewhere else and its fibre elsewhere, so too does society scatter. When such a condition takes shape, all kinds of misconduct begin to grow.

Society, after all, is society. There are widows too who, even after having two or four children, are separated not only from their husbands but also from their fathers-in-law and mothers-in-law. Do they consider themselves less than the men of other families? Why should they? From farming and gardening to educating their children, they do everything. How, then, are they less than men? If they are not less than men, let someone say to their face, “I saw so-and-so’s face and set out on a journey, and the journey itself was ruined.” Life fills the whole of life.

Therefore, not everything is bad. There are widows too who have served their sons according to their heart’s desire. Their homes and courtyards are alive with grandsons and granddaughters. If someone leaves the house without first touching the grandmother’s feet and taking her blessing, will the parents not scold them, saying that one must first touch the feet of the household deity before stepping out?

Just as widows have lived in many different forms, there are also women whose husbands have gone mad, or whose husbands suffer from some grave disease. A woman whose husband has gone mad is not regarded as a widow until definite news is received. And if no trace can be found, then after twelve years his death is presumed.

The real question is the means by which a woman

without a man is to live. As a human being, with what eyes does society look at her? Society, after all, is society; there is no knowing where its mouth is and where its tail. A man who drinks toddy and liquor, in his intoxication, not only abuses and beats other people's mothers and sisters, but also robs them of honour and dignity. Yet among his own mother and sisters, he lives in the family as an ideal man. How such a form of thinking is to be erased is the fundamental matter.

But witnessing the noise around such problems, speaking about them, or attempting to resolve them is no simple matter. Who is diseased, who is indulgent, and who is ascetic is difficult to discern. Not merely difficult; often the very one who is diseased assumes the role of an ascetic and wanders like a creature of the night.

Sulochana Bahin, though not a widow–her husband was still alive–lived the life of one. She had been married at the age of twelve or thirteen, and by nineteen or twenty she had been driven out of her husband's home. Alternatives do exist in society, but not for everyone. For a large section of society, the option of remarriage is open. But Sulochana Bahin had been born into a family where men faced no such restraints, while women did. Her husband's family had driven her out under the false accusation that she could not bear children, yet they had not formally severed the marital bond. A resolution can only come where alternatives exist; where there are none, resolution itself becomes difficult.

From the age of about twenty or twenty-two until sixty or sixty-two, Sulochana Bahin remained in her parental home, though her husband's home still existed.

But the relationship between the parental home and the husband's home has a dual form. In the husband's home, there are relations such as brother-in-law, sister-in-law, mother-in-law, and father-in-law; in the parental home, there are relations of brother and sister, mother and father. Because of this, Sulochana became, in a sense, the sister of the entire society.

Like many other Maithil women, Sulochana Bahin had accepted within herself that she would not have children. Yet whether children would be born or not was not so unknowable that she could not have understood it.

Alongside this, another thing happened. Once her husband had taken a second wife, living in the shadow of a co-wife was worse than remaining in her parental home. In society, there is no shortage of those who offer such counsel: they turn disbelief into belief, initiate even a sixty-year-old into a fifth marriage, take their fee, and paint a colourful world before the eyes.

Sulochana Bahin accepted, within herself, that she would remain in her parental home, but she could not arrange a means of livelihood. Had she built her life on labour, she might have found another path; but she could not seek it. The reason lay in the conduct of the family. It was a household where a woman had no right to take up work outside the home; that right belonged only to men. In that sense, the family too bears responsibility. In a family considered sensible, no thought was given to such problems; this must certainly be regarded as a failing. Many Maithil women have been born on the soil of Mithila who, even without marriage or without husbands, have risen to great heights.

Before anyone realised it, Sulochana Bahin had crossed sixty or sixty-five years. She was tall, fair in complexion, with a round face. Yet, living in her parental home, she became not only the sister of the family but the sister of the whole society. Whenever there was a marriage in someone's house, she would arrive five days in advance, pluck adauri, cut and prepare vegetables for the feast, strain the bar-bari, and sing songs at the village shrine for head-shaving ceremonies, wedding rituals, and many other occasions.

Jugesar retired from the school. Since it had become a government school, the last ten years of his service passed in relative comfort. Along with a government salary, the expectation of additional benefits had naturally arisen. Before retirement, he had left the old homestead given by his father, bought a new house-site elsewhere, and built a good pucca house there. He had five children: two sons and three daughters. As he received a decent salary, he married his daughters into respectable families. But the adverse effect of education had touched his household as well. That effect was this: from childhood, people study not for life, but for employment. As soon as a student moves beyond primary education, the thought of a good job begins to take hold. Work hard, and the result will be good; if the result is good, a good job will follow.

The same idea had taken root in the minds of guardians too. The land of Mithila is fertile, and so too is its intellectual soil. But there is no proper provision for higher education. What, then? Naturally, one must travel from one state to another, from town to city, and from there even to foreign lands.

Jugesar's family followed the same path. After

passing high school, both his sons left the village and went far from home. Even life away from home is no longer what it once was, when a man would go out alone for work and keep his family in the village, so that social ties remained intact. In the present situation, however, as soon as a man leaves, he takes his wife and children along. What kind of life can be lived in a rented, makeshift dwelling, especially for one with limited means? A single room must serve every purpose, from cooking to sleeping.

With both sons gone, Jugesar too, like many others, remained in the village in old age with only his wife. At the stage of life when one needs the service of others, there was no one left to care for them. Many questions arose at once.

Munesar, too, retired from service. He left Palamu and settled in Ranchi. But just as half his income from employment was gone, so too was the rich source of private tuition. There was no shortage of tuition work in Ranchi; besides, Munesar was a science teacher, not only honest in his teaching but also gifted with the rare ability to make subjects clear. Yet despite all this, his body had become so afflicted that his days were marked by medicine morning and evening. He did have the land he had bought in Ranchi, and on it stood the good house built from his own earnings; in that sense, he had comfort. But just as time shapes new kinds of lives, Munesar too had become like many others.

In the name of children, he had only two sons. Both, having received good education, were employed, one in Bilaspur in Madhya Pradesh and the other in Haryana. But what kind of employment was this, when each had taken his wife and children along? Here a

question arises. If one member of the family lives within the society of Haryana and is shaped by that environment, another by that of Madhya Pradesh, a third in Ranchi, and a fourth in the village, how will there be any real integration among them? Even more troubling is the fact that, within two branches of the same family, when one earns more and another less, differences naturally emerge in standards of living, food, education, and upbringing. Why only that? One brother, afflicted by serious illness, may die for lack of treatment, while another has money lying in the bank. The question arises. Is this the legacy of brotherhood, family, or society in Mithilanchal, that we should take pride in it? This is merely to view Mithilanchal from the surface, with half-closed eyes. Its true contribution to the philosophy of the world lies in showing the path to building a good society alongside the making of a refined human being.

Both of Munesar's sons lived far away from him, and his wife too worked about a hundred and fifty kilometres away. Of course, Munesar had no real material want. He received a pension, earned interest from the bank, and also received rent from his house. Yet, despite everything, it seemed to him that no one was truly there for him. How can anyone else understand the need of a sick person for an attendant? Only the one who suffers knows it, the helpless one whom life has already worn down. When a person has no strength left, and hunger and thirst strike hard within, who else can truly understand it? It is like this. One person may serve another by feeding them a handful, while another may give them such a life that they never need that handful at all.

After crossing eighty, Sulochana Bahin lived on the

old homestead in a hut seven cubits long. It was thatched with paddy straw, framed with split bamboo and strips, with three central wooden posts and six side posts of bamboo. Between walls of reed and thatch, a plank door had been fixed into a sheesham frame. Sitting inside that house, when Sulochana Bahin looked into her own heart, she felt that she was the best placed of all, and hummed softly within, “I shall pluck greens and eat; I shall live in Mithila itself.”

With feeling, she looked upon her family. The brothers from all four branches of her father’s line had built their own pucca houses, separated their courtyards, and made their own paths for coming and going. But she still used the same old path, the common path that her father had given to all four branches of the family. It had not been divided then, nor had anyone divided it now. Though it belonged to all jointly, every brother knew that its full, undivided joy belonged to her alone.

And why only that? Every year she repaired her house, making the old new again. She straightened the posts. She thatched it with fresh straw. She stripped away the old coverings of the screens and thatch and put on new ones. She shaped the face and edges of the house and the veranda. She set the steps right. Each day she lived in what felt like a new house. Why should she think that a new house is raised and an old one falls? A house grows old only after a year, when, in the rains, the thatch and fastenings begin to rot. Only then does it become old.

Just as all three branches had installed hand-pumps in their courtyards, Munesar too had one

installed for her. Their fathers and forefathers had once dug a well, but when others had stopped using its water, why should she drink stale and stagnant water? Did she not have a hand-pump like the rest? She saw people standing, as it were, knee-deep in filth around their pumps. How they could feel any purity in drinking water from such places, she could not understand. They cleaned their teeth and threw the twig nearby. They washed utensils and poured the dirty water there. What should one call this, if not waste? If space is limited, one could dig a pit and throw it there. When it accumulates, let it dry in the sun and burn it. Instead of that, should filth be allowed to gather up to the knees?

Her thoughts shifted. The three brothers had built pucca houses and courtyards on three sides. What loss was that to her? She no longer had to put up fencing around her courtyard every year, nor worry about holes made by snakes and shrews. The walls of the three brothers' houses themselves had become the boundary of her courtyard. Even at night, it felt to her as though guards stood alert on all sides, while she, in the middle, cooked peacefully, ate peacefully, and slept peacefully. She lived like a goddess at the centre, with shelter all around her. If thieves or prowlers came at night, would they go to houses with rooms, or to a thatched hut?

As if someone had lifted her chin and turned her face forward, Sulochana Bahin's thoughts moved from the wider family to her own brothers and sisters. Why should she tell her story to anyone? Whoever she might tell were the very ones connected to it. She was not one to read every person's intention at a glance.

Her mind, unsettled, turned towards her middle

brother. What was there to say? Seven sons of Ram, and not one of any use. A man who has two daughters-in-law, strong and capable, will he wash his own utensils or cook for himself? Was Jugesar still of an age to ride a bicycle to Jhanjharpur market, buy provisions, and return? When he had a job, the family ran well enough. He educated his children, married off his daughters in their youth, and built such a house that it would stand for thirty or forty years without concern. On top of that, he received a pension so large that many did not even earn such a salary. Then who could stop the wandering that had begun? For the son for whom the father had done so much, if that very son made him struggle, how would his life go on? What could she do? She was older than him. When a person dies, the world dies with them. Somewhere there is always an earthquake, somewhere storm and rain, somewhere the sea rises, somewhere lightning strikes, somewhere an aeroplane crashes, somewhere a train overturns, somewhere even a boat capsizes. Can any of this be stopped? Then the only thing left is that a person must protect himself and, in doing so, protect others as well.

As Sulochana sank into thoughts of her brother's life, something suddenly opened within her. Jugesar's own conduct had not been good. All his life he had been entangled in quarrels. Why had he taken on other people's disputes, so that now both Munesar and she herself were displeased with him? Why had he grown greedy for land in his wife's family simply because there was no son there? Could he not understand even this much, that such actions would disturb his own household? And that too in a village near Munger Ghat, where every year people pass on their way to Baba

Dham. Did it not occur to him that if some traveller, lost and weary, reached that village and sought shelter for the night, would the villagers abuse and drive him away, or offer him refuge? He is my brother, she thought; his actions are his own, mine are mine. In such matters, should I not speak? Or has everything already passed beyond that point? Not a single coin ever came into my hands, nor had I expected any. I am the elder sister; for me, Jugesar is as much my own as Munesar. But did he ever understand the condition in which his sister lived? I had such longing that society might have cast me aside, yet God had not abandoned me. Could I not have performed the kanyadan of my brother's daughter? As for Munesar, fate did not give him a daughter. And the one who had daughters married them off without giving me even a mouthful to eat. Tell me, is this the upbringing of the son he raised, the one who wrote abusive words in a letter to Ramkisun? If it was a matter of rights over fields and land, should it not have been settled through society or the courts? Why, then, such uproar? Why did he needlessly drag members of society into prison and have doors and doorframes torn away?

But what could she say? God had taken away her husband's home. Otherwise, what concern would she have had with this village and its society? She would have had her own complete family, her children, and would have been absorbed in the flow of life.

Then, just as suddenly, Sulochana Bahin's thoughts shifted again. She began to count on her fingers whether she had lived fewer years than her mother or more. Her father used to say he had crossed ninety, but her mother never claimed such an age. She would only say that her duragaman had taken place in the year of

drought. By that measure, perhaps she too had lived close to ninety. In any case, after her father spoke of his age, he died within two or three years. By that count, it did come to ninety. But how was Sulochana to know her own age? She was not literate, that she could consult a horoscope. Besides, all the old papers had rotted away from years of leakage in the house. Then what was left?

As Barki Bahin's thoughts continued, she remembered Jugesar's birth. It had been three or four years before her own marriage. But both memories were only approximate. There was one way to estimate. It must have been nine or ten years since Jugesar had retired. A job ends at sixty. By that reckoning, he must now be around seventy. At the time of his birth, she had already been a grown girl. Then surely she must be above eighty. As soon as the word eighty formed in her mind, it burst from Sulochana's smiling lips: "This is life!"

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From her middle brother Jugesar, Sulochana Bahin's attention shifted towards her younger brother, Munesar. Between the two brothers, it was Munesar who regarded her as a true sister born of the same blood, and as far as the poor man could manage, he helped her too. But what blame could one place upon him? Had he lived in the village and worked somewhere nearby, then it would have been different. He was so far away; what could his help amount to? On top of that, God had given him such a wife that she was always concerned only with her own family. For one thing, it was a matter between husband and wife; for another, theirs was an educated family. What could one say anywhere, or to anyone? However it was, the poor man did at least this much: for so many years he would sometimes send something, and with that she somehow managed to get by. Now even that was no longer so; he had deposited such an amount in the bank at one time that she faced no difficulty through the year.

As for the younger sister, she had such a family of her own that she had almost forgotten her parental home. Even when Sulochana wished to meet her, it did

not happen. How could she go to her younger sister's husband's home? What would people say? The elder sister is like a mother.

After sweeping the house and courtyard, plastering the hearth and cooking place, washing the utensils, and arranging the firewood and sticks, Sulochana Bahin went to the hand-pump to fetch water. When she had filled the bucket and lifted it to leave, she slipped and fell there on the platform, bucket and all. It was fortunate that her neck and head remained beyond the edge of the platform; otherwise the fall was such that she would have died on the spot. Her head was saved, but from the waist down she was crushed and stunned. It was a cement platform, and on top of that came the blow of a bucket full of water. As soon as she fell, she called out once, loudly, taking the name of her cousin: "Manohar, O Manohar, I have fallen at the pump!"

Her voice reached the courtyards of all three branches of the family. But hearing the first cry, just as people prick up their ears and wait for a second cry, so all the families of the brotherhood waited and listened for another call. Before she could call a second time, Sulochana Bahin lost consciousness. The joint bone of her lower back had broken. On top of that, the blow from the filled bucket had also struck her.

When no second cry came, Manohar grew suspicious. Why had she not called again? It could hardly have been a meaningless cry. From the courtyard, he opened the rear window of the house and saw Sulochana Bahin lying flat on her back near the hand-pump, sprawled helplessly. Shouting from inside the house, Manohar rushed out: "Sulochana Bahin has fallen

at the pump!"

Hearing Manohar's voice, children and women from the courtyards of all three branches came running to Sulochana Bahin. Among the men, there was only Manohar. And the women, after all, were women. There was no great crowd for work, but there was an ocean of opinions. All kinds of thoughts began to move about. The arrows of suggestion flew so fast that Manohar's own sense deserted him; he was stunned by their very weight. He could not decide whether his sister was alive or dead. Her body and limbs did not stir even once. Manohar became like a bicycle or cart without brakes, whose direction no one can predict. On top of that, his wife said, "First see whether she is breathing through her nose!"

But in the meantime, his cousin's wife, his bhabhi, also spoke up: "Put your hand on her chest and see!"

Hearing two different suggestions from the two women, Manohar grew confused. Still, respecting his bhabhi's advice, he placed his hand on Sulochana's chest and felt a heartbeat. But just then his wife muttered in irritation, "I told you to check the breath at her nose, and you started putting a stethoscope to her chest like a doctor!"

Manohar could not make sense of his wife's remark. The previous evening, when there had been a quarrel between his wife and his bhabhi, he had not been in the village, and so he knew nothing of it. Neither of the two women had told him either. They had not told him because both had intended to settle the matter themselves.

After feeling the heartbeat in her chest, Manohar

placed his hand near her nose and understood that her breath was coming, but in broken intervals. Yet what was to be done now? Among the men, he was alone. How could he lift her and take her to the veranda? When there is abusing and fighting, the relationship between elder brother-in-law and brother's wife seems not to exist, but in moments of distress it certainly does. His wife alone was there to join him in the task; all the others were his bhabhis. How could they hold her body? Besides, she was like someone half-dead. Her body and limbs must be loose and helpless. Had she been conscious, he could have lifted her on his back. But one person would be needed just to steady both sides. If he held her trunk, what would happen to her two legs? And if they were broken, they might break further and hang down. How could he take her to the doctor? And if he went to call the doctor, who knew what might happen in the meantime?

Just as the small bundle of a child's understanding remains tied shut, so the lower compartment of Manohar's own sense seemed to close. Sulochana Bahin lay near the hand-pump, pale and gasping. Then wisdom came to him. Leaving everyone at the pump, he went into his room, took out his mobile phone, and called the familiar village doctor. Afterwards, he called his cousin as well. As soon as he made the calls, people began to arrive one after another.

On reaching there and seeing the swelling in her lower back, the doctor said, "Most likely her back has broken, or the joint of the lower spine has slipped out. This is beyond my capacity. For the moment, I shall give her an injection, but take her to a good doctor."

Three or four brothers, together with the doctor,

carefully lifted Sulochana Bahin and laid her on bedding in the veranda.

After the injection was given, Sulochana Bahin began to groan, but no words came from her mouth. She could not even gesture with her hands. Manohar immediately sent word to Jugesar, thinking that, whatever the matter, she was his own sister, born of the same parents. It was upon him that they all would depend. Even if he did nothing, there were still the kinsmen and the wider society. Society, after all, is an ocean. From ancient times it has been so: if someone is struck by a grave illness, or wishes to study, or must arrange a marriage, society contributes and sees the task through.

As soon as the messenger delivered the news, Somni prodded her husband, "Why should she not be your sister now?"

Hearing his wife's words, Jugesar fell into confusion. He was a defeated man in life, and now only he and his wife remained in the household. He said to the messenger, "In sorrow, everyone remembers God. Why should she not be my sister now? She used to say that I had taken the four kathas of land dishonestly. At that time Munesar was the brother, and now it has become me."

Encouraged by her husband's response, Somni added, "As one does, so one receives."

Hearing the words of both husband and wife, the messenger returned and told Manohar. Listening to the response of her own brother, Manohar was taken aback. He himself was only a cousin, one step removed from being born of the same parents. Beyond that, there was

society as well. Of course, the other cousin-brothers were still there. They could only serve as far as they were able. They were not God, that they could give life. Still, it would be better to inform Munesar too. There might be strain with Jugesar, but Munesar would surely do whatever he could.

Manohar telephoned Munesar and said, "Munesar, Barki Bahin has fallen at the hand-pump. She is badly hurt and still unconscious. Come quickly."

As soon as he heard the news, many questions rose in Munesar's mind. He could not immediately respond. I am thousands of kilometres away, he thought. What is needed is to take her to a doctor. Why not leave it to Manohar to manage things until I arrive? Yet it would not be right to remain inactive. Even if I sought help from society, it would only be through words. In all these years, what real service have I done for society?

At once, Munesar said over the phone, "Manohar, I have begun preparing to come. I shall reach as soon as I can. Since it depends on trains and transport, nothing can be said for certain. Meanwhile, do not let any work stop for lack of money."

Having placed the responsibility upon Manohar, Munesar let out a long breath. As that breath escaped, he felt like calling again and asking to speak to Barki Bahin. But immediately he thought that, in the rush of work, even conversation might become an obstacle. Empty talk would serve no purpose. He then called his younger sister and said, "Bucchi, Barki Bahin has fallen at the hand-pump. Somehow, reach the village as quickly as you can."

Hearing Munesar's words, Kavita replied, "Bhaiya,

there is no one at home. I am alone. The moment I leave, the house will be deserted.”

Hearing his younger sister’s words, Munesar was stunned. I am far away, he thought, and even those who are nearby are also far away. What has happened to us? “The house will be deserted!” It is only household things and goods that people may steal. Everyone in the family earns; they can buy them again. But one’s own sister, born of the same blood?

In his mind, Munesar began to calculate the distance to the village. The Ranchi-Jaynagar train was not available the next day. He would not be able to catch it today. Nor could he set off straight away. A person sets off directly only for a place where there is some hope of doing the work; where there is no such hope, one must go prepared. The bus route too would not get him there before the train. Then what? He would certainly catch the train the day after tomorrow. It would be better if both husband and wife went. With a woman patient, a woman’s presence would be useful. In the meantime, the bank work could be done the next day. Of course, he would not ask the sons to come, but he must at least inform both of them. Asking them to come would be proper only if she were truly alone and without anyone.

Travelling with the whole family without reservation would be difficult. It would not be good either if luggage were stolen on the way, or if something happened to the children. Better to inform both sons.

Picking up the mobile phone, he called Raghunath.

“Baua, Didi has fallen at the hand-pump. I have heard that her back has been badly injured.”

At the mention of Didi, Raghunath’s heart startled.

He said, "Should you not tell Barka Babu by then that you are coming? Until you arrive, the responsibility is yours. You go ahead. Do not worry about money at all. I am in the office now, so I cannot talk much. I shall phone after reaching my lodging."

After hearing Raghunath's view, Munesar called his younger son on the mobile.

"Baua, Barki Didi has fallen at the hand-pump. Manohar has just told me on the phone."

With childlike simplicity, Ramakant asked, "And what else has happened to her?"

Munesar replied, "This is all the information I have. If I get any more, I shall tell you again."

"Babu, no one can give life to another person, but one can certainly try to save a life. For that, go ahead. Later, if needed, I too shall come. I shall speak to Raghunath Bhaiya after office. Since treatment facilities in the village are poor, we shall decide according to the need. Here, good treatment is available."

"For now, take it only as information. Until I see things with my own eyes, it will not be right to say anything. What one hears is often twisted and tangled. People make a light matter heavy, and a heavy matter light."

The words of both sons filled Munesar with strength. Firmness came into his mind. He would not miss the train the day after tomorrow under any circumstances. Then there was his wife; it was proper to tell her too. But she would certainly raise objections. Well, let her object as much as she wished; he would have to move along the course of his own decision. If she objected, he would tell her plainly: she is my sister, like a

mother. If anyone in the world considers service to parents a good thing, then I too understand it so. A wife does not mean one who leads a man away from the right path.

Munesar made up his mind: it would be better to speak to his wife immediately. He called Sadhana on the mobile and said, "It is necessary for me to go to the village the day after tomorrow. Submit an application for leave at the school and come to Ranchi tomorrow."

Hearing her husband's words, Sadhana asked, "What sudden urgency has arisen that you have decided all at once to go to the village?"

After telling her everything about Sulochana Bahin, Munesar said, "If I do not go there and serve her, then who is left for the poor woman in this world to do so? I have heard that Bhaiya and his wife are almost rejoicing, as if something good has happened. In such a situation, if I do not recognise my responsibility, my heart will not bear it. Whatever the case may be, for now it is enough that you come tomorrow."

In his words, Sadhana sensed pressure. Without considering her own responsibility, she replied,

"The school will not grant leave now."

Munesar said, "My whole life has been spent in schools. Why would they not give leave? And if they do not, then come anyway."

Sadhana responded, "How can I come just like that?"

Munesar answered, "By resigning. But we have to go to the village."

Just as Sadhana had spoken under pressure,

Munesar too now came under pressure. The two pressures were different: one was the pressure of duty, the other of authority. Both moved in opposite directions.

Sadhana said sharply, “She is your sister. You go and see her. I will not go now.”

Hearing her reply, Munesar felt as if he had fallen into the darkness of a moonless night. In that darkness, everything seemed dim, as though everyone were running after their own concerns. I am one person’s husband and another’s brother, he thought. It is true that the closeness I share with my sister is not the same as what my wife feels. But does that mean my wife should be considered an outsider?

She is the companion of life, one who has taken a vow to cross its hardships together. Yet tomorrow, the opposite may also come to pass.

Munesar was stunned. After a while, however, he steadied himself. I am letting my mind wander unnecessarily, he thought. Everyone shapes a world according to their own mind, feelings, and thoughts, and then lives within it. I can do only as much as lies within my strength. The day after tomorrow, I shall certainly catch the train, whatever obstacles may arise.

The train from Ranchi to Jaynagar was due to leave at a quarter to six in the evening. From three o’clock onwards, Munesar kept looking at the clock again and again, afraid that he might miss it. The station was only fifteen minutes away. At four o’clock, after informing the tenant, he locked the house, took his bag, and set out.

There was still an hour and forty-five minutes left, yet his mind kept telling him that if he went exactly

according to time and some obstacle arose on the way, and the train was missed, then all that he had thought through would be ruined. Better, then, since he was only waiting for the train at home, to go to the station itself, buy the ticket, and sit on the platform, so that there would be full assurance of catching it.

On reaching the station, Munesar went towards the enquiry office. There was, of course, only one Ranchi-Jaynagar train, running three days a week, so he knew the time himself. Yet, with all kinds of thoughts rising in his mind, he began to doubt even his own knowledge. Perhaps, somewhere in between, the timetable had changed. Earlier, train timings used to change in April and October according to day and night, but now nothing was certain. The time could be changed at any moment. There was a reason for that too. As long as long-distance trains were few, the convenience of day and night could be considered. But that was no longer the case. With trains running day and night, passing through so many junctions and ordinary stations, what convenience of time could there be?

At the enquiry counter, Munesar confirmed once again what he already knew. Then he sat on the cement bench of the platform and turned his gaze towards the village. It seemed neither dark nor light; he saw everything as if through dim twilight.

He began to see: among four brothers and sisters, I am there, and Sulochana Bahin is there too. But from what is known so far, what are we really? Are we four, or only two? If today Bhaiya and his wife had regarded Barki Bahin as their own and taken the lead in getting her treated, would such a situation have arisen? She would have been under the care of some hospital or

doctor. But that was not so. If someone, even by borrowing money, had taken steps until now, there would not have been so much worry. The illness had not been encircled at its final limit and pushed back. Since no treatment had been given, the illness itself had found its opportunity, and what was bad must have become worse. But thought is only thought. How thought takes the form of action and moves forward is no small matter. Whatever the case, one's own measure and judgement must be made on the touchstone of one's own life. The world of feeling, or the world of thought, depends upon action.

As soon as the word touchstone came into his mind, a firm question stood before Munesar: can the touchstone of the place where one is, and the touchstone of the place where one is not, ever be the same?

In the crowd of thousands on the platform, Munesar saw himself as alone. Who would look after whom? Everyone had their own ocean of existence to cross. Everyone had their own path, their own ghat, their own vessel, and their own ferryman. Just as, in a crowd of lakhs, love finds no place elsewhere and attaches itself to the heart of the beloved, so Sulochana Bahin's heart attached itself to Munesar's heart. It was possible, too, that she might die before he arrived. If that happened, no one could stop it. Had there been someone to stop it, perhaps it could have been stopped; but there was no such person. Then the only thing would be that whatever time and labour he would have given to her life would turn elsewhere.

A clamour rose on the platform that the train would not run. The engine had broken down. As soon as

the rumour spread, restless passengers began questioning one another. A crowd gathered at the enquiry counter. Everyone had the same question: what had happened, and why would the train not come? The man at the counter, knowing nothing, replied irritably again and again that there was no information.

But passengers are passengers. Each has their own purpose. For some it is less urgent, for others more. Those with less urgent work grew uneasy, but those with matters of court, doctors, or hospitals could not remain calm. If one does not reach court on time and fails to mark attendance, a warrant may be issued. It is the same with hospitals. If a patient does not receive medicine in time, the consequences can be fatal.

Within fifteen minutes, however, the tone of the clamour changed. The mood of the platform began to shift. In one place, people said that if the train did not run, there would be great loss; in another, that three days' work would be delayed. Then the news spread gradually that the train would indeed run, until it reached everyone on the platform.

It was said that the train would arrive in fifteen minutes. Passengers began finishing whatever small tasks remained. Some went to buy bottles of water, others provisions for the journey. Meanwhile, Munesar kept looking at his watch again and again. Now he would not move from his place. Had he had a reserved ticket, there would have been some assurance of a seat, but he did not. If he failed to board the general compartment early, he would be caught in the crush. Young people might endure the pushing and jostling, but he could not. The porters and railway staff would already have marked seats in advance and would later sell them for

extra money. That would become clear only at the end. Time, after all, is time; even an ordinary matter can suddenly weigh upon a person and make him helpless.

Only ten minutes remained for the train to arrive. Again and again, Munesar lifted his head and looked behind to see whether the train was coming. Just then, the phone in his pocket rang. Taking it out, he saw his wife's number. Seeing it, he neither answered nor rejected the call.

The phone kept ringing, but Munesar's mind turned back to his wife's nature. What was one to make of such a relationship? But the train was about to arrive; what could be said now? Nothing. Within, his thoughts clashed until, at last, he cut the call and set the matter aside.

Almost immediately, another call came. Seeing the number, his mind softened, like dry earth touched by water. His heart stirred. It was Raghunath. As soon as he answered, Raghunath said, "Babu, are you catching the train?"

Hearing his son's voice, Munesar softened. He wondered what to make of it. Was his son instructing him, or standing firmly by what needed to be done?

But there was no time to think. He replied, "My child, I have come to the station to catch the train. It is about to arrive."

Raghunath said, "Babu, you do not have time to talk much now. I am at my lodging. Your grandson is here, and your daughter-in-law is with me."

Hearing "grandson" and "daughter-in-law", Munesar's heart trembled softly. Raghunath could also have said that both his son and his wife were with him.

Why had he not said that? Why had he said that the grandson and daughter-in-law were there? Though they were his own, why had he not called them his own?

With a heart as beautiful and cool as water from the depths, Munesar said, "Baua, there is no time for much talk, but keep this in mind..."

Raghunath replied, "I shall keep it in mind. Rather, it is already in my mind. Go with confidence. When you reach Bokaro, Jasidih, Barauni, and Darbhanga, do let me know. In a matter where you and I are the ones to do the work, let there not knowingly be even the slightest neglect. Unknowingly, something may happen; do not worry about that. Now put the phone down."

Hearing "put the phone down", Munesar's mind surged like a sea tide. He said, "Baua, there are still five minutes before the train comes. Let me say one more thing."

Hearing "one more thing", a thought rose in Raghunath's mind. Just as a hungry person has no measure of how much he will eat, and a thirsty person has no measure of how much water he needs, so it seemed to be with his father. He needed a companion. But I am his son, Raghunath thought. I can stand behind him and support him; how can I stand beside him as an equal? The one who could give that kind of companionship is Mother. What has she done? Yet how can I even ask him whether Mother is with him or not?

He said, "Babuji, as soon as you reach the village, whether it is night or day, find out everything about Sulochana Didi and let me know. I too shall remain in touch with a doctor here. Whatever is needed will be done accordingly. If proper arrangements are not

possible in the village, bring her here. During office hours I shall be away only for that much time; meanwhile, my wife will stay with her. The rest of the time I can manage myself. Now go and board the train without worry."

Hearing Raghunath's words, Munesar said, "Baua, there are only three minutes left now. What shall I say from here? If there had been someone else with me, I would at least have talked to them. But even that is not there."

In his father's trembling voice, one word leapt out and fell below like a flaxseed from a cracked pod: someone else.

Whenever Raghunath spoke to both his mother and father on any matter, it became clearly apparent that there was distance between their thoughts. But distance too is distance, whether it lies ahead or behind. A distance in the opposite direction from the same road becomes double. Yet the world has its own strange play. From the equator, if the distance towards the south is matched by the same distance towards the north, the seasons begin to resemble one another. Both his parents were educated, one with a B.A. and the other with a B.Sc.; therefore it would not be right to weigh them as more or less in intellectual terms. There was another reason too: in age also they were of the same generation. So the question could also arise: who has seen more of the world, I or you?

Yet one large question remained: in one and the same work, two lines of thought rise and stand within a family. A family too has a direction: will it move forward, remain still, or roll backwards?

Raghunath’s mind began to halt. Cut any finger of the hand, and the wound is one’s own. But thought too is thought. One person will not abandon his view even before the bullet of a gun; another, understanding it as a play of the mind, rolls it away like a marble. Whatever it may be, let those who know, know as much as they know. But here the question was of one family, in which there were father and mother, two brothers, two daughters-in-law, and three children. The children, of course, were still very young. Yet even among the four who remained, how would the family run properly unless their thinking came together? If one thinks of the family as a two-wheeled cart, then the father and mother are at the front, and they stand on two different sides. How will the family move forward, especially not on a downward slope but up an ascent?

No complete trust can be placed in any work until the mind’s thought becomes speech and moves towards action. When the hand is at the ghat and the mind hangs elsewhere, what certainty can there be?

In Raghunath’s hand, as in Munesar’s, the mobile phone waited for speech, silent yet expectant. But there were words in neither mouth. A pause may bring rest, but how can there be rest in the middle of such a moment?

Just then, the thunder of the train sounded. As soon as the noise struck his ears, Munesar said, “Baua, the train has arrived. I am going.”

Hearing his father’s words, Raghunath spoke, his voice dry like grain rattling in a cracked pod: “Babu, you go ahead and keep giving information. We shall act according to the need. I am young; if I do not bear the

pushing and jostling of trains now, when shall I? Whatever the situation, we shall respond accordingly. Is it necessary that I take the whole family with me? I have my own lodging; she will stay in our own place. Work too has its own surge. For two or four days it rises like the tide of the sea, then gradually settles."

Having said this, Raghunath ended the call and lowered the phone. His wife, standing nearby, asked, "Is Babuji going to the village alone? For one thing, he himself has many illnesses, and on top of that, he has had an operation on his stomach."

After saying this, Sunita fell silent.

Raghunath, lost in thought, looked in one direction towards his father, and in another towards his wife and child before him. All were his own. In such a situation, taking a step was not easy. Yet, just as an earthquake or flood grips everything while it lasts, whatever may follow later, so it was here. Gesturing to his wife to sit, Raghunath said, "You speak to Mother. I shall listen."

Sunita said, "Mother, we have heard that Didi's back has been broken in the village, and Babuji has gone?"

Before her husband, Sadhana's speech had already been unrestrained; before her daughter-in-law, it was even more so. She replied, "She is his sister. Will he not go?"

Sunita asked, "He himself is unwell. Then if he too falls ill, what will happen?"

Hearing her daughter-in-law's question, Sadhana put the phone down. Sunita kept saying, "Hello, hello," but no answer came.

Among thousands of passengers, Munesar sat on

a corner seat in the train. Just as scattered paddy lies loose in a wide field, so people's talk fell scattered and meaningless upon his ears. His mind remained fixed on his journey. Among the four brothers and sisters, just as Sulochana Bahin was there, so was I, and so too were the other brother and sister. But why, then, only two out of four?

Then his mind turned inward. I too am the same. When even my wife did not come with me at the hour of need, what shall I say of others? Each person is the king of his own mind, and each is its beggar too. The world is not like a photograph printed in a book. Everyone is born as an agent of action, and day and night each goes on acting. The intention of all may be the same, but what actually happens, who can see for whom? Yet the responsibility that rests above one's own self, towards family and society, must also have been created by oneself. ❑

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The minds of Raghunath and Sunita were equally childlike, in the sense that neither had seen the world beyond the individual and the family. Thirty-year-old Raghunath's world had stretched from school and college to the bank; Sunita's too had remained confined within school, college, and family. Of course, Sunita had a strong desire of her own: since she had graduated, she wished to work somewhere, and with that income support the family. At an individual level, this was a natural thought. Everyone should stand on their own labour and move through life. But a human being is one who has the capacity to create another human being. Therefore, the combined form of woman and man is the family. Only when the thoughts of husband and wife come together can the path be held and crossed. Of course, if the salaries of both are combined, even the same work will not remain of one kind; some difference, some variation, will inevitably arise. There is a reason for that: two different ways of living.

When the relationship between Raghunath and Sunita was first established, both had their own separate thoughts. There was a reason: neither had a job at that time, so there was no constraint upon their thinking. Just

as Sunita had freshly left college, so had Raghunath. He was, however, two or three years older. Sunita had completed her B.A. Honours, while Raghunath had completed B.Sc. Honours as well as an M.B.A.

Raghunath's father, Munesar, believed that a job might come two or four years earlier or later, but marriage too has its own time. Since his own employment had come after marriage, he saw no reason to delay. The same view was held by Sunita's father, Madan Mohan. In his own life as well, things had unfolded similarly: after passing the administrative examination, his training had been delayed, even though that was the stage just before service. Yet both families had their own circumstances.

In Munesar's family, the duragaman took place three or four years after marriage, and in that time efforts for employment could continue. But in Madan Mohan's family, both thought and practice followed a different course. Until then, he had lived entirely under the authority of his parents. Because of this, a second line of thinking had not emerged, that once the son obtained employment, he and his wife would leave the household. Just as a husband has a claim upon his wife, and a wife upon her husband, so too do parents-in-law have a claim upon the daughter-in-law. With time, the tasks of cooking, eating, and managing the household had become so simple that they scarcely required even an hour.

Before the duragaman itself, Raghunath secured a job in the bank. Sunita remained waiting to enter her husband's home. After marriage, there is always a transition between the parental home and the marital

home. Madan Mohan and his wife understood clearly that the extent of their authority over Sunita before marriage would now have to be reduced. If they supported her taking up employment but her husband's family did not, it would not be right to press the matter forward.

After the duragaman, three homes stood before Raghunath at once. The first was his lodging in Bilaspur, where every kind of facility was available. The second was the home in Ranchi, though his father lived in a rented house in Palamu. The third was the ancestral village, which, under the blows of time, was swaying and being uprooted. How would it not be uprooted? Even at the wedding there was departure, and where did that departure lead? To the place where he worked. The husband's home had already slipped away first; slowly, the parental home too would slip away. And along with it, where would remain the makhana of Kojagara, the winter clothes of Tilasankranti, and the observances of Madhushravani?

Knowing his wife's nature, Munesar shifted the burden from himself and told Raghunath before the duragaman: "Baua, it will be better if, after the duragaman, you go to Bilaspur. In the next holidays, I too shall come."

The lodging in Bilaspur had three rooms, each separate and sufficient. Drawing his salary from the bank, Raghunath returned to the lodging, placed the money on the bed, and, as he set off towards the bathroom, said to Sunita, "I do not feel like having a snack. I had something in the canteen. But I shall drink tea. By the time I come out of the bathroom, arrange for

tea."

Had it been a place where tea leaves or sugar were difficult to obtain, the wife, receiving such an instruction, might have had to struggle with stove and fire. But where that was not the case, the work itself became the answer. That is what happened.

Raising the question of building life upon his own earnings, Raghunath said, "This is the first salary after your coming. I have earned it outside and placed it in your hands. Now you tell me how you will run the household."

Without having drawn any map of life, Sunita poured out the thought in her heart.

"I too would like to work somewhere."

Hearing his wife's thought, Raghunath fell silent. But here there was no third person to cover that silence. Here, the question had to be answered. At once, several questions rose in Raghunath's mind like clouds splitting with thunder. As husband and wife, the moment we step out of the lodging, I fear someone may recognise me as a bank employee and attack us. Similarly, when I reach the office, I tremble lest there be some violent disturbance. Well, that is outside the home. But do I find even the lodging safe? Despite having everything, it feels frightening. In such a place, should a woman go out alone from the house?

A second thought also rose in Raghunath's mind: the expenses of the house would be determined only after establishing the standard of the family; yet that too depends on the work of the household. What is household work, after all? It is proper food, clothing, shelter, the education of children, marriage and giving

in marriage, and the handling of occasions and misfortunes, from serious illness to social duties. Running through his own thoughts, Raghunath became troubled and remained burdened with silence.

But did that mean Sunita wished to repeat her question? Her wandering mind turned towards her parents. Though her father had been a district-level administrative officer, in a family of five he would bring, once in eight days, a hundred grams of goat’s liver or three eggs, and all of them would eat together. They would cut it into small pieces and divide the portions fairly. Since childhood, she had never spoken a lie. She had never touched another person’s belongings. Such habits, she felt, must be planted in her own children too.

Raghunath said, “What is your own view? Make it clear.”

Hearing “make it clear”, Sunita paused. The reason for her pause was this: the salary with which her father had properly run a family of five was almost the same as her husband was now earning. Her mother had not worked outside the home. Then what need was there for a job? A family, after all, is a system. Just as a country has its own laws and processes, so does a family. Only by following them can fulfilment be achieved. If both husband and wife spend their time in the pursuit of money, how will relationships be formed with children, family, and society? In their own stream of thought, parents are regarded not merely as those who give birth, but as teachers too.

The question is this: if husband and wife together give birth to a child, care for the child for three years, and then send the child to a school far away, how long

will the child's attachment to the parents remain? On top of that, the form employment has taken today hides the hours of life between the pages of work. For one thing, everyone already has the personal demands of life, from bodily needs to sleep; on top of that, the heavy burden of work continues to fall upon them. By investing time, income may increase, and with it the desire to shape life accordingly. But the question remains: within the twenty-four hours of day and night, how much time is left for oneself or for the family to grow and flourish, and how much is consumed by the race of the world? Whether it is individual life or family life, one must find a path suited to the times; otherwise, cut off from the current, one is left stranded on the bank.

For the making of a human being, individual action is essential. Without it, human sensitivity is inevitably wounded. The same holds true for family and society. The reason Raghunath asked Sunita so directly was that his own family, his mother and father, had come to his mind. A family can move forward only when its members are taken into confidence. Only then does its true form emerge, and within it the proper development of the individual takes place. He had asked the question in order to understand what lay in his wife's heart.

But Sunita belonged to a family shaped by intellectual discipline; therefore, she came to a halt at the question. Both fell silent. Neither Raghunath could move forward and speak, nor could Sunita. Yet the matter could not be resolved without words, like birds pecking in place of speech. A beak belongs to parrots and mynahs; one eats ripe tilkor fruit, another eats it raw. But the question before them was a Yaksha's question, as much for Raghunath as for Sunita.

Though they sat on the same bed, their minds wandered a hundred yojanas apart, like ascetics lost in meditation. How could they not wander? After all, the question was of laying the foundation of a family.

The train moved at its own pace. Sitting on the corner seat, Munesar forgot to inform his son by phone. He did not even realise how many stations had passed. In his mind, the life of Sulochana Bahin kept returning again and again. If today she, like other sisters, had been living in her husband's home, with sons and daughters-in-law, grandsons and granddaughters, why would he have had to travel at night? But if she had none of that, should he too become a stranger to her? Though Bhaiya and Bhabhi were near, they were as good as distant. The younger sister too was almost absent. Then who would look after the poor woman? Out of the three, he was one. But if all three had taken even a small share of the burden, it would certainly have become lighter. His son had rightly said that no one gives life to another; one can only serve. In that service, there must be no deliberate fault. Unknowingly, even a mistake may occur.

His mind turned towards his wife. The wife who had taken the vow of being his companion in life was now, in effect, separated. What kind of companionship was this, when he was going for a task that lay at the foundation of life, and she was not with him? Yet his son stood behind him.

As soon as this thought came to him, Munesar quickly took the mobile from his pocket and dialled.

"Baua, the train is moving fast. There is light inside the compartment, but outside it is so dark that nothing can be seen. I cannot tell where we have reached. I have

lost track of the stations."

Hearing his father, Raghunath said, "Do not keep any worry in your mind. I am awake too. I shall keep giving information from time to time. For now, I do not think it proper to contact any doctor, so I have not done so."

"All right. Put the phone down."

As soon as the call ended, Sunita said, "For one thing, Babuji himself is afflicted with so many illnesses, and on top of that, his sister is in this condition. How will he manage?"

Hearing Sunita's words, Raghunath said, "What is the other way?"

Sunita had no answer. Seeing her caught in uncertainty, Raghunath continued, "Father deserves gratitude. Even with his diseased and ageing body, he is ready to serve. If everyone gives him even a little support, will he step back? Certainly not. And even if he does, if we stand behind him and recognise the importance of the work, what will his stepping back matter? Wherever he has reached, up to that point our own road and the family's road will already have been made. We only have to move forward from there."

Raghunath's words shook Sunita's thinking and shifted it. Just as a wrestler losing in the arena, or a dancer faltering on stage, changes the movement and creates a new turn, so Sunita altered her ground and said, "Why could Mother not understand Babuji's condition?"

Just as Sunita, finding herself without an answer, had changed her position, so her question compelled Raghunath to shift his own. But the question had

become so dense that it was difficult to grasp its root. Without reaching the root, however smooth the words, the real condition would remain obscured.

At once, many questions rose in Raghunath's mind. Would it be proper to speak of his mother's stubbornness to the wife sitting beside him? If he did not tell her, that too would not be right. For one thing, she was an educated and sensible woman. Had she been, like some others, dull and uncomprehending, there might have been some excuse, but that was not the case. Secondly, between husband and wife, a new relationship had to take shape as companionship. Just as, if the first branch of a young tree dries up, breaks, or is cut off, it leaves a lifelong mark, so too here. If such a thing happened, would he ever be able to stand with confidence again? If, whenever he tried to stand firm, he were struck down by this very matter, where would that confidence remain? The blow would not only strike his chest; it would pierce his heart.

Raghunath found himself caught in a strange state. A thought arose in his mind: when another crisis comes in life, dharma protects one; but when dharma itself falls into crisis, who will protect it?

The more he searched for the root of the matter, the more the crisis deepened. Until now, he had lived under his mother's care, and that could not be denied. But the manner in which he had lived could not be ignored either. The weight of these thoughts made his face so dull that it became difficult for him to inspire immediate trust in his wife. It does happen that a well-nourished child blooms even with a little care, but a weak child, or one newly weaned, does not. To make

such a child thrive, hope appears only when the caretaker tends patiently at the root.

But that did not happen with Raghunath. Instead, just as when one meets a companion after years and the last moment of parting joins the first moment of meeting, so a thought formed within him. He said, “After all, we two are together here, and Father must be alone in the train. A long journey is difficult in itself; alone it becomes more so. It would be good if you spoke to him.”

Speaking directly with her father-in-law seemed improper to Sunita. Improper because between father-in-law and daughter-in-law stands the husband. It was possible that something might be said which would not be appropriate. There was reason for this too. Here, the two of them, husband and wife, were together within a settled home, while he was alone on a night journey in a train. Even otherwise, the world is uncertain; and a train, after all, is a place of constant movement. What if someone took away his bag, leaving him without food or the medicines he needed? He might be in real difficulty. Yet between man and woman there is another thread of relationship too, where husband and wife may stand apart, but a son remains a son.

As this thought came to her, Sunita said, “It would be better if you call him on the mobile. I shall listen too.”

Hearing Sunita’s words, a thought rose in Raghunath’s mind: in what form another person’s mind understands a thing can be known only after it is spoken. If only Father and I speak, we shall speak in our own way. In the course of this work, we have already come so far; beyond that, if we speak of only one more matter, what will she gain from it? But the question is of

family thought.

He said, "Look, a tree grows from a seed. On one side it rises towards the sky, and on the other, after putting out its head, it smiles and grows down towards the underworld. Beneath the soil, from the main root other roots come out, and from those roots still more roots. In the same way, branches emerge above the earth. Just as the chief branch grows outward in the form of the tree, and the root beneath the soil becomes firm and helps the upper form of the tree grow, while second and third branches continue to emerge from it, so in the family to which we belong, I stand at the front of the previous generation's line. After me, on one side, there is you, and on the other, my younger brother. You, in the sense that you stand beside my shoulder. My brother is younger than you in age. You went to school earlier; you came forward earlier on the stage of the world. He came later. So relationships must be seen face to face.

"Just as there is the relationship of husband and wife between us, so there is the relationship of younger brother-in-law and elder brother's wife between you and my brother. In the same way, you and his wife are co-sisters. Just as a younger co-sister is like a daughter, so a younger brother too is like a son. This is what family relationship is. Therefore, in Father's present condition, it would not have been proper for me to ask him anything beyond that. If tomorrow I too need to go, then you will go to my younger brother's place. As long as I remain away, you will stay with Ramakant. Whenever there is time to talk, the two of you, as co-sisters, will speak about each other's families and about our own family. Not merely speak, but think together: how far

Father has brought us, and how we must move forward from here."

Several questions came from Raghunath's mouth at once. Mithila-born Sunita, seeing many ghats along the same stream, began to wonder at which ghat she should bathe first. Just then, the mobile rang. As it rang, Raghunath picked it up.

The moment he answered, Munesar blessed him and asked, "Baua, are you awake?"

Hearing "awake", Raghunath could find no reply. He merely cleared his throat. Hearing that, his father said, "Baua, we have almost reached Jasidih. Until now, I have not even felt sick once in the train. I have kept medicine and water with me; whenever I need to take them, I shall take them. Still, a train is a train. Just as during an earthquake the earth shakes and the body and limbs shake with it, so it is with a train."

Hearing his father, Raghunath filled with relief and said, "Babuji, morning must have come by now. It must almost be light. How does it seem there?"

The window and door were closed, and with the electric light inside, the compartment seemed almost like day. But outside, it was dark, dense like smoke. Because of the cold wind, Munesar had not opened the window to look out. For one thing, the train was moving fast; on top of that, if the wind was blowing strongly, then by the time he opened the window, looked out, and closed it again, the gust would chill his face. There was little need to look outside either. They had gone just beyond halfway; five or seven hours of the journey still remained.

He said, "Baua, I shall reach Darbhanga by ten

o’clock.”

Hearing “Darbhanga”, Raghunath asked, “How will you go from there? I hear the train does not stop at Sakri. Then you will have to get down at Darbhanga, won’t you?”

“Yes, I shall have to get down at Darbhanga. I do not see another way. If I go further, the train will stop at Madhubani. But it will be better to get down at Darbhanga than at Madhubani. For one thing, the road from Madhubani is not good; it is so rough that it jars the whole body. Besides, transport connections are not reliable. From Darbhanga, everything is better. The broad-gauge train goes to Jayanagar, and one also goes to Biraul. Even if there is a train after an hour or so, I shall go by train to Sakri, and from there take the train to Nirmali. If anything can be said with certainty, it is that the train is the best mode of travel. At Darbhanga itself I shall bathe, wash, and eat something. Otherwise, the timing of my medicines will be disturbed.”

Hearing his father’s words, steady with purpose, Raghunath felt a quiet satisfaction. The reason for that feeling was simple: when a person sets out with resolve, the work itself yields according to the heart with which it is done. In the midst of Munesar’s effort, diligence was evident. Where there is diligence, there is the possibility of success.

He said, “Babuji, I too shall get up now. It must already be light. Call me as soon as you reach Darbhanga.”

Hearing his son’s words, the weariness in Munesar’s body seemed to lift. In his mind, he had already reached Darbhanga station, finished bathing,

and sat down to eat at a small shop. He began to count his medicines: if he took all three tablets together, he would remain free of worry for the next twenty-four hours. By then he would reach the village as well. A village is a village. Even if no one came forward to help, he could pay for labour and have the work done. Why should the task be abandoned for that reason?

He said, “Baua, today it feels as though I have not retired. I may have retired from the school, but the family too is no small school. Among the four brothers and sisters, Sulochana Bahin is the eldest. From her family to her husband’s home, life has worn her down and drained its taste. Before her, nothing remains except death. If, at such a moment, I can be present, what greater thing can I do in life? If life holds life by the hand, what more is there to seek? If life is preserved, everything is preserved.”

Hearing his father’s words, filled with quiet resolve, the son too felt strengthened and said, “Babuji, do not let thoughts of expense trouble you. I shall also make arrangements here with the bank and the doctors. You must inform me as soon as you get down at Darbhanga.”

“Very good. Put the phone down.”

Seeing Raghunath alert like a bee at dawn, Sunita seized the moment. She took the phone and said, “Fire has broken out in Vrindavan, and no one will put it out.”

Hearing this early in the morning, Raghunath was startled. Just as Chakeba, for the sake of his sister cast out by family and society, left even his parents and stood by her, so too had his father done. Was it right that his mother did not stand beside him? If something were to happen to him on the way, what kind of life-partner

would that be? To withdraw from what could be done for his father would be betrayal. And if his mother too turned away from serving Didi, he could not accept that as right.

Let her remain attached to her parental family; that in itself caused no harm. But when a direct question arose between the two families, and she leaned away from her husband's home towards her parental side, then it crossed a line. It was good if there was no bitterness, but when the matter touched the roots of the family, one had to ask at which root water should be poured.

At a quarter past ten, the train reached Darbhanga station. It was not like the Nirmali–Sakri train, where one must struggle through crowds and guard against pickpockets while boarding and getting down. Munesar thought of calling Raghunath from the train itself, but decided it would be better to call from the platform. As soon as he got down, he said, "Baua, I have reached Darbhanga. In about an hour, there is a train for Biraul; I will take that to Sakri. I cannot talk much now. I have to get ready within the hour."

Setting aside all thoughts of bank work and office duties, Raghunath pictured his father in his mind. Already burdened with illness, and further weighed down by age, yet see the path he had taken to fulfill his responsibility.

Like one who has mastered his senses and remains alert, Munesar moved quickly. He picked up his bag, went to the toilet, completed his needs while keeping the bag with him, paid at the counter, stepped out, and went to a small hotel. He ate lightly, took his medicines,

paid the bill, bought his ticket, and returned to the platform. The train was already there. He boarded and sat down, releasing a long breath.

From Sakri, everything would become easier. The village was nearby. Whatever needed to be done, he would do after seeing the real situation with his own eyes. It was daytime now.

Before the train started, Radhacharan from his village hurried into the same compartment. Seeing the difficulty of finding space, Munesar called out, “Radhacharan, come here.”

He shifted slightly and made space for him. Then he asked, “What is Sulochana Bahin’s condition?”

Radhacharan replied, “I have been in Darbhanga for seven days. I do not know clearly. I have only heard bits of news.”

Munesar asked, “Why have you been away for seven days?”

“My younger sister had a stomach operation.”

Not dwelling on it, Munesar asked, “Was the operation successful?”

“Yes, yes. But the expense was heavy. The stitches will be removed the day after tomorrow. I have come to arrange some money. Then I will return tomorrow.”

In Radhacharan’s work, Munesar saw his own. What he saw was this: when the sister’s operation had taken place, her mother too must have come. Along with her, one or two other family members would certainly be there. He himself would not remain inexperienced now, and since Radhacharan too would return tomorrow, he could arrange his time accordingly. At

least this much would be possible: Radhacharan was going from the village itself as a family member. If money could not be arranged in time, he might return the day after tomorrow instead of tomorrow. After all, one task stood upon another. The stitches were to be removed the day after tomorrow. There was time to reach by then. But in his own case, that was not so. It might be that he would have to return even today.

In his mind, Munesar began making calculations. As he thought and weighed matters, it occurred to him: were those old days still there when money would arrive from the post office after a month or two? Now, wherever one went, the cash-box went along. Such an ATM system had come that whenever there was need, the need could be met. Adjusting his thought, Munesar said, "Radhacharan, you must have been going around the hospital all this time?"

Hearing his own praise, happiness rose in Radhacharan's mind. As soon as it rose, he began to speak excitedly.

"Kaka, what have I not seen in these seven days? I have seen an entirely new world."

Hearing "new world", Munesar said, "What new world did you see? Has the hospital been built only today, that you have seen something new?"

Just as water in a vessel placed on the stove begins to boil when heat rises from below, so Radhacharan's mind began to bubble. But the worry of money pressed down upon him. From the colour of his face, Munesar understood that the blow of money was striking the poor fellow's heart. His need is the same as mine at this moment, he thought. If so, why not stretch out a hand,

like the friendship of the blind and the lame?

He said, “How much money do you need, Radhacharan?”

There is, of course, a notion among people that they will speak of every matter under the sun, but keep matters of giving and taking money hidden. Yet need creates such a situation that it brings even what is hidden into the open. Radhacharan said, “Kaka, out of hesitation I did not open my mouth. For one thing, I do not have that kind of close relation with you; for another, you too are now caught in trouble.”

Hearing Radhacharan’s words, Munesar fell silent. He is speaking after weighing my situation too, he thought. You too are in trouble.

He said, “As long as there is life, some trouble or other will keep coming. If people grow frightened because of that, how will any work be done? Everyone knows that in a dark room there may well be snakes. Yet it is in that very darkness that the snake-charmer catches his prey.”

Hearing Munesar’s words, Radhacharan was struck still. He said, “Kaka, I have managed everything up to now. For emergencies, I have even left five hundred rupees in Mother’s hand. All told, there is still an expense of fifteen hundred ahead.”

Hearing “fifteen hundred,” Munesar felt the amount was small. He said, “Very well. Remove the worry of money from your mind.”

As soon as the worry lifted, Radhacharan began speaking eagerly, like a bee fluttering out of a blooming flower.

“Kaka, I was saying I have seen a new world. Let me

tell you. Just as there is a drama at the cremation ground, so there is a drama in the hospital. I saw one man crying. When I asked him, he said, 'I sold a field and came to get my son treated. I had not even reached the doctor when, on the way, three scoundrels came and snatched the money. I was left staring. Who will believe what I say? The police station is nearby, people are all around, and still such a thing happened!'"

Munesar's mind was fixed on Sulochana Bahin, and other talk fell on his ears like dry, scattered grain. He said, "Why are you wandering without reason, Radhacharan? When lightning strikes, a man shields his own head first. Tell me this: which doctors treat broken bones?"

Hearing Munesar, Radhacharan fell silent and began to think. Treatment was available in the hospital and privately too. But just as an ownerless cow depends on the keeper's mercy, so was the condition of the hospital. One person cheated in work for fees; another sold medicines. One spoiled the work for commission; another sold food. Compared to that, private treatment was better, but only for those who had money. It cost three times as much.

He said, "Kaka, as the money, so the treatment. What can I say?"

Hearing this, Munesar began to weigh what would be best. Suddenly, like a mango falling from a tree with a thud even without wind, a thought dropped into his mind. Treatment is treatment, after all. It is not that one should sell house and homestead for a hundred-year-old person. If that is done, and in the next generation the same illness comes, what will be done then? Yet if

property exists and treatment is not given, that too would not be right. Whatever the case, as far as possible, he would not hold back in spirit.

He said, “Radhacharan, if the money is arranged today itself, will you return today?”

Eagerly, Radhacharan replied, “Why do you say today? If it is arranged right now, I shall get down at the next station and catch another train back. Somehow or other, this is a matter of illness, isn’t it? Who knows what may happen when? As long as one is there, something can be done.”

Hearing this, Munesar felt that the companion he had found might slip away. Still, at least upon reaching the village, it would be right to see Sulochana Bahin first.

He said, “When you go to the village, you will also learn the condition of the family. That will be better, won’t it? You say you have been away for seven days.”

Radhacharan’s wavering mind wavered further. He said, “Yes, that would be good. I shall also learn all the other news of the village. I shall take one quick look at the fields too.”

Seeing his own work smoothing out, Munesar said, “All right. Tell me one thing: will transport be available in the village at the right time?”

“What shortage of transport is there? Of course, at odd hours there is some difficulty. But when the need arises, a vehicle will be found. You may not know, but I am acquainted with all the drivers. Even from home, everything can be arranged.”

From the station, the two of them reached the village together. On arriving, Radhacharan went to his

own house, and Munesar to his.

As soon as he entered the courtyard, Munesar saw Sulochana Bahin lying on bedding in the veranda, groaning. Near her pillow, a lota of water had been placed. Her whole body was covered; only her face was uncovered. There was no one beside her.

A thought rose in Munesar's mind: relationships are of two kinds. They may have many branches and forms, but broadly they fall into two. One is the relationship of lineage and kinship; the other is the relationship of obligation and kindness. In the present time, who has so much leisure that they will leave their own work and care for another? Everyone is burdened with their own troubles. Sons and daughters-in-law do not look after parents, nor do parents look after sons and daughters-in-law. Parents do raise their children, from education to marriage, but the bond often loosens when the time for earning arrives.

And that is not all. From the moment children are born, mothers, fearing the loss of their beauty, sometimes do not nurse them, but give them tinned milk. Then, as soon as the child grows a little, they are sent to residential schools. Because of this, meetings become rare, left to chance. If things go on like this, why would anyone truly recognise anyone else?

But a relationship of obligation is different. At least some feeling remains: someone stood by us in a difficult time, with money or support; it is right to repay that debt. Munesar's mind became entangled from both sides. Since he had not lived in the village, he had done little for the community. As for the kinsmen, they were such that they would attend feasts, but hesitate even to

perform small duties in times of mourning.

Sitting near Sulochana Bahin, Munesar said, “Bahin! Bahin! It is I, Munesar. I have come.”

Hearing his voice, Sulochana Bahin opened her eyes and tried to rise. The upper part of her body moved, but below the waist there was no movement at all. It was swollen too. Seeing her attempt, Munesar said, “No, do not get up. Stay lying down.”

He wondered whether he should first call the relatives and ask them, or listen to his sister first. He decided it was better to listen to her, and said, “Bahin, what happened, and what is happening now?”

Just as, in a flood, even an ant rejoices upon finding the smallest support, so Sulochana Bahin, finding her last support, felt relieved. She was so relieved that her heart trembled. She said, “My child Munesar, what has happened has happened, and what is to happen will happen. But you must be tired from the journey. First eat something. I would have made tea for you too, but my body has given way.”

Hearing his sister’s words, soaked in affection, Munesar was astonished. Yet seeing all his own paths, ahead and behind, closed, he too was stunned. With a stunned heart, looking at a defeated life counting its last breaths, he said, “Bahin, as long as we have the chance to see each other face to face, good and bad will both remain. But you must keep courage, and whatever I can do, I shall certainly do.”

Sulochana Bahin’s heart was shaken, and she did not properly hear Munesar’s words. But seeing a pause in the conversation, she said, “My child, neither any kinsman from the family comes even once to see me,

nor anyone from Jugesar's house. I had great hope that in a time of distress Kavita would stand by me. But she too has not once turned back to look. Then who remains for me in this world, whose face I should look at and keep living? Better that God should give me a place with Him."

Seeing the relationships of Sulochana Bahin's world breaking apart, Munesar said, "This has always happened in the world, and it will go on happening. That is why people do good or bad deeds. All right, let me speak a little with the cousins, and then I shall take you to the doctor at once."

Saying this, Munesar moved towards the threshold of his cousins' house, but he found neither man nor woman there. Just then Radhacharan arrived. As soon as he saw him, Munesar said, "Radhacharan, come with me to Jhanjharpur for a little while. I shall settle your work on the way too. Let us show Bahin in Jhanjharpur, and then we shall do whatever seems best."

Hearing Munesar, Radhacharan said, "Kaka, I shall inform the driver as well. By the time he arrives, I too shall get ready at home."

As soon as the vehicle arrived, Radhacharan called out to the women around him, "Four or five of you lift her and put her in the vehicle."

Standing beside him, many questions rose in Munesar's mind. If he opened his mouth and asked any woman to accompany them, she would certainly take the name of some man in the family and make an excuse. Then what? He said, "Radhacharan, a woman will be needed to attend to her, so...?"

As soon as Radhacharan heard him, he said, "Kaka,

why are you worrying? There are nurses in the hospital. It would not be good to delay the work for that."

Just as Munesar had come from Ranchi, his bag was still packed. There was no question of getting ready; he was ready already. Three or four people gathered at once, and Sulochana Bahin was lifted and placed in the vehicle.

There was, of course, a government hospital in Jhanjharpur, and private treatment was also available. But the government hospital had no real guardian. It ran on God's trust. On the way, Munesar asked Radhacharan, "Who is the best doctor?"

Hearing "best doctor," Radhacharan became confused. The question of good and bad arises where there are several doctors in the same field. But where doctors for every illness are not separately available, how is one to judge? For bone trouble, there was only one doctor. How could one measure good and bad there? In that case, the one available was the good one. A one-eyed uncle is better than none. He said, "Kaka, if you look here for something like Ranchi, or like Darbhanga and Patna, the work will not move. Here, for fractures, only one person gives treatment. What will come of going elsewhere?"

Hearing Radhacharan's words, Munesar reflected and found them weighty. What other way was there? Besides, it was not necessary that if there was only one doctor, he must be bad. He might be good too. Then again, doctors did have one weakness: even when a disease did not fall within their proper understanding, they would still hold on to the patient and drag the case along. Whatever the matter, he himself was not entirely

helpless. He would see whether things were good or bad.

By the time they reached the doctor's place, evening had fallen. Doctor Ramesh had gone out for a walk. But as soon as the vehicle arrived, his wife informed him. He returned at once. On examining Sulochana Bahin, he said, "Master Sahib, the instruments needed for this are not sufficiently available here. It would be better to take her to Darbhanga."

Hearing "Darbhanga," Munesar began weighing matters. There were many problems at once. If they rushed blindly and then could not manage things there, what would he do? Darbhanga was not a village where people would step forward out of familiarity. He was alone and did not know the place well. He must be grateful to Radhacharan for helping this much. But the patient's condition was not such that she could be taken to Ranchi or Patna either. There was also the difficulty of transport. Since the national highway had been built, the route to Patna had become somewhat easier, but not so for Ranchi. Drivers of small vehicles would hesitate to go that far. Even if someone agreed to go to Patna, the same problem of attendants and support would arise there as in Darbhanga.

Seeing the situation becoming heavy, Munesar asked, "Radhacharan, what will be the easier course for me?"

Hearing this, Radhacharan was caught in difficulty. As far as he could, he had stood by him. But his own sister had undergone an operation, and leaving her would not be right. Illness is illness; one never knows what may happen when. If he took on this burden as well, it would be hard to carry it through. No one can

carry both bananas and curd together. If one cannot even lift them, how will one walk? One load is curd in an earthen pot, the other a bunch of bananas. Like a bent pole, the weight would tilt to one side. Yet a human being is a human being; a kind word pleases everyone. Goodness has many forms, but the good that helps the work is the real good.

Holding the matter steady, Radhacharan said, “Kaka, what is the nature of this body? Jagannath and Kedarnath are both sacred, yet they stand in two different directions. One lies in the east, the other in the west. One must go in one direction at a time. That does not make the other lesser. You can see my situation as well.”

Hearing Radhacharan’s words, Munesar began to think. Just as this sister is mine, so that sister is his. In the forest of the world, each person has their own ties and their own ground. As Sulochana Bahin’s burden rests on me, so Radhacharan has his own burden. Besides, Sulochana Bahin has crossed eighty, while Radhacharan’s sister is still unmarried and has not yet seen the world. It would be right to let him attend to his own work. Until now, the poor fellow has managed with all his strength; he too may be helpless. At the very least, it would be proper to give him the money first. Once his work is set in order, it will become clear what he does next: whether he leaves this matter and goes, or settles it first and then goes. It is said that in sorrow everyone remembers God.

Taking his purse from his back pocket, Munesar gave Radhacharan fifteen hundred rupees and asked, “Will your work be managed with this, or do you need more?”

Until now, Radhacharan had calculated fifteen hundred. But the expenses of courts and hospitals are always uncertain, like the corner of an unseen measure. It did not seem wise to let Lakshmi, once arrived, slip away. So he said, "Kaka, if you could add five hundred more in advance, that too would help."

Hearing him, Munesar thought: this is how it is with a person in need. But since I have asked, it would not be right to refuse now. Completing the amount to two thousand rupees, he said, "Now there will be no difficulty, will there?"

Smiling like a flower just opening, Radhacharan said, "Kaka, now I shall take my patient home the day after tomorrow, and then come wherever you are. Even the fare for the journey has been arranged."

Hearing this, Munesar felt a sense of shame. The feeling was this: when more than one thing is mixed together, both khichri and kheer may be made, but the two are not the same. ❑

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Hearing Doctor Ramesh's words, Munesar began to measure the distance in his mind. If, by some means, he could reach Ranchi with Sulochana Bahin, that would be best. The train for Ranchi from Darbhanga was at eight o'clock the next night. Until then, there was the whole day to consider. The rest would be understood in the train.

He said, "Doctor Sahib, please make arrangements for her until she can reach Ranchi."

Hearing Munesar, and seeing his own burden grow lighter, the doctor said, "I shall give her injections and medicines. Keep her here until four o'clock tomorrow. Everything is available. There will be the room rent for the day and the cost of medicines. For three days she will remain on the same course; there will be no need for any great fuss."

Munesar said, "Very good. Radhacharan, we shall catch tomorrow's train and go."

Hearing Munesar, Radhacharan said, "Why are you saying this to me? What can I say?"

Munesar replied, "You have heard Doctor Sahib's view. Then stay with me until tomorrow's train is caught."

Radhacharan said, "In any case, I have to go to Darbhanga tomorrow. If, in the meantime, this other work is also done, what harm is there? But instead of sitting all day in Jhanjharpur, Darbhanga would be better. I can see my own patient as well, and this work too can be managed."

Seeing all the facilities available in Jhanjharpur, Munesar said, "Well, your thought is not one to be rejected either. But since a whole day's room rent will be paid here, and all facilities are available, make the plan in such a way that we do not have to arrange lodging in Darbhanga."

Trying to fit both tasks together, Radhacharan said, "Stay here till twelve tomorrow. After that we shall leave from here. I too shall see my patient, take advice from the doctor, and then put you on the train."

Radhacharan's words seemed right to Munesar. He was nodding in acceptance when suddenly his son Raghunath came to mind. As soon as he remembered him, he called Raghunath on the mobile and said, "Raghunath, I am in Jhanjharpur. There are not, of course, facilities here like in Darbhanga, Patna, or Ranchi. Doctor Sahib too has said it would be better to take her to Ranchi."

Hearing Munesar, Raghunath said, "If he takes responsibility until Ranchi, it will be better to come to Ranchi itself."

Munesar said, "Yes. Doctor Sahib says he will make arrangements for three days. If I go to Darbhanga or Patna, I shall become exhausted alone. Better than that will be Ranchi."

Raghunath said, "Do whatever is best."

The next day, towards morning, another four-wheeler was hired, and at twelve o'clock the three of them set out for Darbhanga.

On reaching Darbhanga, Munesar made enquiries at the station to find out on which platform the train would arrive. After making the necessary arrangements, he engaged two porters and had Sulochana Bahin taken to the platform and laid down there.

Radhacharan said, "Kaka, you wait here for four or five hours. In the meantime, I shall meet my people and come back."

"Very good."

Leaving the station, Radhacharan began calculating in his mind. The train from Jaynagar would arrive at half past seven. Until then, there was no work here. But his own work still remained. The stitches would be removed tomorrow, and then the lodging would also be vacated. Meanwhile, whatever accounts and payments had to be settled would be cleared. Since the train was at half past seven, he would return by seven.

That is what he did.

Seating the brother and sister in the train for Ranchi, Radhacharan said, "Kaka, in Ranchi you have your own house and people you know. There should be no inconvenience. Even so, if there is any need, let me know."

Hearing Radhacharan, Munesar was astonished. A thought arose in his mind: what kindness had he done in some former birth that Radhacharan had done so much for him? The money I gave him, I shall not take back. The poor man will not have to worry about repayment, and my own heart will say that he stood by

me in illness. All my life I have gone on earning, yet I had never done such a kindness for anyone. Even now, in society, there are so many false and wasteful expenses. If those could be saved, or if the way of spending were changed, then the needs of those who wish to study and those suffering from serious illness might not be solved completely, but they would certainly be eased to a great extent. Not only that, a society that is now drifting without direction might also steady itself and come onto the right path. Until a person or a society leaves the wrong path and takes the right one, how can there be welfare? However loudly the drum of welfare may be beaten, it cannot bring change by itself.

At once his mind turned. Was it necessary that some kindness from him must have reached Radhacharan? It could be that the initiative was Radhacharan's own. Why not? If he had done some kindness, would it not have remained in memory? Whether everything in life is remembered or not, true kindness is never forgotten.

He said, "Radhacharan, you stood before me like God. I shall never forget this in my life. You too remember that if ever there is any need, tell me. You can see my condition, that I live on medicines, but that does not mean I have become useless."

Hearing Munesar's words, Radhacharan forgot that he still had to go three kilometres alone. He said nothing. He simply fixed his eyes on Munesar's and looked at him steadily.

As the time came, the train gave its whistle. Hearing it, Radhacharan came back to himself. The train began to move. Radhacharan stood on the platform,

and Munesar took the road to Ranchi. Munesar, turning back, and Radhacharan, looking forward, slowly disappeared from each other's sight.

On reaching Ranchi, Munesar came to his lodging. One by one, the tenants came and began to look at Sulochana Bahin. As many mouths, so many opinions and suggestions.

After laying Sulochana Bahin down in the veranda, Munesar began to think of what should be done next. Since she was a woman, a woman's presence was certainly needed. Of course, the tenants were there, but he had his own family too. There was discord and bitterness in their minds, but what of that? In family and society, this quality too exists: at ordinary times, quarrels arise over lime and tobacco, but at the hour of need, people also come forward to manage things. People dismiss such quarrels by saying it was the fault of the day. It would be better, before taking her for treatment, to consult the family. In the family, there were three men, father and sons, and three women, mother and daughters-in-law; but nearby there was only his wife. A hundred kilometres was not such a great distance. Besides, if he told the daughter-in-law, the son too would be burdened. Better, then, that it should be his wife.

His mind accepted this. But at once another question arose: what if his wife did not co-operate?

Munesar's fainting mind suddenly snapped awake. One troubled heart can hold seventy-two hopes. Calling his wife on the mobile, Munesar said, "I have brought Sulochana Bahin here. Seeing the inconvenience elsewhere, this seemed best. So take leave and come."

Hearing Munesar's words, Sadhana spoke exactly as if the reply had already been sitting on her tongue.

"You have brought her, that is good. Get her admitted to hospital. Everything will be arranged there. What work is there for me? You stay at the lodging and go once or twice to see how she is."

Hearing his wife's view, Munesar was stunned. He did not have the courage to speak further. He put the mobile down and began to think: what should be done? Who does not know what hospital arrangements are like? A little better here, a little worse there, but the condition is the same everywhere. Darbhanga is more disorderly, Ranchi and Patna somewhat more organised. Still, one cannot call it good. It is the same doctors and nurses who keep moving from one place to another. The fault does not belong to a place; the fault lies in people's ways. As the conduct and habits of the people are, so is their work. Yet even that does not happen by itself; it happens according to the system. People angrily place blame upon particular individuals, but that is not the whole matter. From bottom to top, the colour is the same. A little less here, a little more there, but it exists everywhere.

Growing firm, a thought came into Munesar's mind: I shall get Sulochana Bahin properly treated. Death and life are not in my hands, but arranging what is good or bad is certainly in my hands. Whatever I do, will Sulochana Bahin not see it? She certainly will. If at some moment she feels like drinking water and there is no one to give it to her, what will she think? Will she think she is being well served? I have heard my wife's opinion. Let me ask my son too. But I shall not ask my daughter-

in-law to come. If my wife were here, she is mature in age and knows the ways and arrangements here. My daughter-in-law does not.

Calling Raghunath on the mobile, Munesar said, “Baua, I have brought Bahin to Ranchi. There will be better facilities here.”

As soon as he heard Munesar, Raghunath said, “You have done well. First find out where the best arrangement is. Even if a little more money is spent, there must be no shortcoming in the treatment.”

Hearing Raghunath’s words, Munesar’s heart filled.

He said, “Baua, in a family everyone depends on one another in this way. If that does not remain, what difference will there be between human beings and animals? For one thing, everything except humans lacks discernment. Secondly, is not human birth meant for action, while others live only for enjoyment? If that does not appear in human beings, then what difference remains between a life of action and a life of mere enjoyment?”

Raghunath listened to his father’s words with full attention. He kept listening, but said nothing. Yet what Sunita said beside him, Munesar also heard. She had said, “Ask whether Mother is there or not.”

Raghunath asked, “Why?”

Sunita replied, “If she is nearby, the work will become easier. At such a time, a woman’s presence is necessary. From caregiving to arranging water, such needs do arise. A man’s time goes in moving between the clinic and the medicine shop.”

Making an excuse, Raghunath said to his father,

“The signal is breaking. I shall speak again in a little

while.”

After ending the call, Raghunath said to his wife,

“What you are saying is right. But how can I ask him whether Mother is there or not?”

Sunita did not answer from the same angle. Changing her line of thought, she said, “There is no certainty about human nature. Over small matters, people even take their own lives. Life is not a child’s game, where one builds a house of mud, plays for a while, and then wipes it away and walks off.”

Raghunath said, “Yes, that is true, but...”

Sunita cut him short, “No ‘but.’ Speak plainly. Tell him a woman is needed. If Mother is not coming, I am ready to come. Ask him to take Bahin for treatment. I shall catch the train and come. Tomorrow will go in travel; I will reach the day after.”

Hearing his wife’s words, Raghunath was stunned. It was indeed a moment of duty. Her reasoning was sound, yet he could not bring himself to question his father about his mother. Then what? Why should she not speak to him directly? The father-in-law was not an outsider, nor was the daughter-in-law. Their relationship was like that of father and daughter. Why, then, should they not speak openly?

Picking up the mobile, Raghunath dialled the number and placed it in Sunita’s hand. Sunita said, “Babuji, I touch your feet.”

Hearing his daughter-in-law’s voice, Munesar gave her his blessing, but avoided saying anything further. He avoided it because whatever had to be said, he would say to his son; how could he say it to her?

Hearing no further word from her father-in-law,

Sunita said, "Just as Sulochana Bahin is his elder sister, like a mother to him, is she not my elder didi too? She is like my father's sister."

Munesar said, "She is. Even if the practical side of behaviour breaks because of quarrels and disputes, the ancestral bond still remains. How can I deny that?"

Sunita said, "I am catching the train tomorrow and coming."

Hearing that she was catching the train and coming, Munesar was stunned. His daughter-in-law would come and see the conduct of her mother-in-law. And if she asked why Mother was not there, what answer would he give? Yet the course of work is such that it lays bare both good and bad. His mind grew warm.

As it warmed, his mind spoke: to cover truth is a sin. Among human beings, relationships stand face to face. Everyone has the right to act for themselves; she too has that right. Therefore, it would not be good to stop her.

Hearing no word from her father-in-law, Sunita said, "For one thing, he too has grown old; on top of that, he has many kinds of illness. It may happen that illness strikes both of them hard at the same time. Then who will look after whom?"

Munesar, left without an answer, became stirred and said, "Daughter-in-law, I do not think it proper to interfere in anyone's right; therefore, I shall say nothing. Do as your heart wishes. You are free."

Saying this, he put the mobile down.

As soon as the mobile was put down, Sunita said to Raghunath, "At the time of work and effort, one should not keep any work covered or hidden. That obstructs the

work. When the work itself is obstructed, how will the work be done?"

Raghunath said, "Yes, it certainly will not be done."

Finding support, Sunita continued, "Take me to Ranchi by tomorrow's train and then return. You are employed, so your leave will be cut and your salary will be cut. But after reaching there, I shall see everything with my own eyes. If he does not need me, that will be understood; if he does, I shall stay and serve her."

His daughter-in-law's words dug into Munesar's heart. He began to think about what should be done. Of course, there was a doctor in his own circle of relations. The doctor knew him, and he knew the doctor, but since they had never spoken face to face, neither would recognise the other by sight. At once, however, a conflict stood up in his mind. One part of his mind said: when a relative is a doctor, why should the work not be done well? Another part said: when everything has become a play and spectacle of money, why lose one's dignity by giving an introduction? Dignity too is dignity. If the mother-in-law and father-in-law earn their living even by begging, but an elephant stands at the daughter and son-in-law's threshold, how will they stretch out their hands? Yet property is property; it is something to be consumed, while dignity too is of the same order.

Whatever the case, Munesar decided that he would introduce himself as a teacher. He would make no mention of village or family connections. His mind settled. Enthusiasm arose. Tomorrow he would certainly go to the doctor. But before going, it would be better to see the hospital arrangements as well, and also look at the private options.

The heart too accepts what the eyes have seen. Without seeing, it may happen that, in haste, the wrong thing is done. Later, even if understanding comes, the work itself may already have slipped away.

The next morning at eight, Munesar took a tempo and reached the hospital. He went from patient ward to patient ward and looked around. His mind accepted that it would be better to have the treatment done privately. There were, of course, several doctors for bone trouble, but who among them was good? Asking and enquiring here and there, he came to know that Doctor Shekhar was good. But then, he was a relative too. The nature of people with money also changes. However close someone may be, leaving aside five per cent, they will say inwardly that whoever comes lost and helpless thinks the place is a dharamshala. So it was better that, since there was no recognition by face, language too would help maintain distance.

After seeing and enquiring in the wards, Munesar had just reached near the office when Doctor Shekhar got down from his car and entered. Taking it as a good coincidence, Munesar waited a little and then followed him inside.

As Doctor Shekhar sat down on the chair, Munesar asked, “Doctor Sahib, would the hospital be better, or private treatment?”

Doctor Shekhar replied, “Both are good. After all, we are the same people in both places. As for care and attention, here we can ask the staff, but we cannot put pressure on them. In private treatment, the matter is different.”

The conversation between the two had only just

begun when Munesar's cousin-nephew, Doctor Shekhar's brother-in-law, arrived at the office. As soon as he saw Munesar, he touched his feet and asked, "Kaka, how have you come this way?"

Munesar said, "Bahin fell at the hand-pump, and her back has been badly injured. I have come to find out whether the hospital would be better or private treatment."

Observing the relationship between Munesar and Devendra, Doctor Shekhar's brother-in-law, Doctor Shekhar opened his mouth.

"You were posted in Palamu, weren't you?"

Munesar said, "I was. I have now retired."

Just as Doctor Shekhar knew many things about Munesar, so Munesar too knew about Doctor Shekhar. But at Shekhar's marriage fifteen years earlier, though Munesar had been present, there had been no recognition of faces. Just as, through some relative, the bundle of the mind suddenly opens before a person eager to read a book, so it happened with Doctor Shekhar. The reason was that the marriage arrangement came back to his mind. He remembered the good lineage and standing of his wife's father's maternal side. It was higher than his own. Of course, marriage relations between higher and lower families were old, but here the matter had been different. Here the reason had been money. His generous father had adjusted his thinking after seeing the comfort and security his daughter would have.

He remembered the life of Sulochana Didi, how she had been struck down and pushed aside in both her parental and marital homes. If humane values were not

upheld in such a situation, then his own thinking would hold no worth.

As soon as this thought settled in his mind, Doctor Shekhar said to Devendra, “Chachaji has come, and you are sitting here chatting?”

Then Doctor Shekhar reflected that it would be better to explain matters at home; otherwise, he might fall into needless embarrassment. The moment his wife learnt that he had not even recognised Chachaji, whatever followed, the meal would certainly turn awkward. Better, then, to acknowledge that he was on duty for now, settle him in the office, and attend to him properly afterward. While Chachaji had tea and paan, he himself could finish the case at hand and plan the next steps.

Devendra understood Doctor Shekhar’s signal. What he grasped was this: had it been his wife’s elder brother, the situation might have been different. But that was not the case here. He would proceed as he thought best. After all, the expense would have to be borne.

He said, “Kakaji, please rest for now. This is not a house, it is a government hospital. One must be careful here about what to eat, drink, and accept.”

Seeing the burden ease, Doctor Shekhar said, “There is one operation pending. Once I finish it, I shall be free. Then we will attend to the next matter.”

Seeing the hospital office take on the air of a home, Munesar felt reassured that he had come to the right place. Even if his wife was not with him, his niece would certainly be there. He had seen her from childhood and knew her nature well.

Rising from the table, Shekhar said to Devendra, “Inform Chachi at home. Tell her I will come after two hours.”

After two hours, once the movement had settled, Doctor Shekhar, Munesar, and Devendra began to discuss the matter. Neither Shekhar nor Munesar spoke directly to each other; Devendra stood between them, and both addressed him instead.

After some thought, Munesar said, “Since the arrangement has been decided, it would be better to bring Barki Bahin here first.”

Doctor Shekhar listened quietly. Devendra said, “First bring Didi to the lodging along with Kaki. Doctor Sahib will be off duty by then. He has his own clinic and will come to see her from time to time.”

Hearing Devendra’s words, Munesar grew uneasy. What unsettled him was the phrase, “bring Kaki along as well.” But the patience of a drowning man always trembles, and in the midst of that trembling, a device came to him.

He said, “Baua, people do say such things, that Kaki too should be brought along. That is how you understand lineage and family.”

Munesar spoke in this way, hiding himself before his son-in-law, but his heart began to reproach him. He felt ashamed of himself. If such a thing could happen in an educated family, where both husband and wife were educated, then what must be the condition of others? Yet just as one lie swallows thousands of lies, so one truth has its own strength. If nothing else, once the son-in-law was out of sight, he would tell Devendra plainly: Baua, my wife is not co-operating.

As soon as the tempo arrived, Munesar said to Devendra, "Baua, what burden should I put on you? I cook for myself. When there is no work, there is the gas arrangement, and it does not feel difficult. But see for yourself today: should I cook, or should I take Bahin to the doctor?"

Hearing Munesar, Devendra said, "Is that house an outsider's house? I have already told them. We shall all eat there."

The three of them reached Doctor Shekhar's lodging by tempo. As soon as they arrived, Yamuna remembered her parental home. She remembered the days when Sulochana Bahin used to stay there, and how many Sama songs and other things she had taught her. Was this not the same Sulochana Didi? But she said nothing.

Doctor Shekhar looked at Sulochana Bahin with a doctor's eye and considered the matter. What he considered was this: the body would have to be cut and opened; perhaps, out of affection, his own heart might melt. Yet, being a doctor, he could not say such a thing openly. Turning the matter aside, he said to Yamuna, "The work is certainly serious, but it is not impossible. Even so, it will be better to call another colleague as well."

Yamuna could not understand Doctor Shekhar's hint. But that things should go well was certainly in her heart. She said, "Why only one? Call as many as are needed. If all the bone specialists of Ranchi are needed, call all of them. But we must see Didi leave this place on her own feet."

At half past six in the evening, Sulochana Bahin's

operation was performed in the presence of three doctors. It was a good operation.

On the third day, Raghunath arrived, anxious and out of breath. Seeing the lodging locked, he contacted them on the mobile. The belongings, of course, were still there. Keeping everything in the tenant's lodging, Raghunath and Sunita set out for Shekhar's place.

Sitting on a chair placed in the outer veranda of Doctor Shekhar's lodging, Munesar was thinking: on one side, he was among his son, daughter-in-law, niece, and son-in-law; on the other, he was away from his own half of life. This is life.

Seeing his son and daughter-in-law getting down from the vehicle on the road, Munesar moved forward. But how could Raghunath ask anything without first touching his feet, and how could Munesar say anything without first giving his blessing?

Both sides moved towards each other. As they came near, Sunita touched his feet before Raghunath could do so. The moment she touched his feet, Munesar blessed her and said, "Daughter-in-law, this is the family of my niece."

Hearing the sound of the vehicle on the road, Yamuna too had come outside. But seeing unfamiliar yet familiar faces, she stopped for a moment.

As she came near, Munesar said, "Raghunath, both of you come. Baua, this is Yamuna Bahin."

It was evening. Raghunath asked Doctor Shekhar, "Doctor Sahib, there is a little difficulty here. The difficulty is that I work in Bilaspur, in Madhya Pradesh. For one thing, it is a job, and that too in a bank. I cannot

take her there immediately from here."

Doctor Shekhar said, "Let her stay here for seven days. In that much time, she will recover enough that you will not need to take her to another doctor. Medicines will continue."

That is what happened. After seven days, all of them, Sulochana Bahin, Munesar, and Raghunath with his wife and child, left for Bilaspur.

Six months later, all of them came from Bilaspur to the village.

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